

How to Be an Active Ally

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the diversity movement



Even years after the racial reckoning that spread across the globe in 2020, many people are still unsure about how to act as active allies to improve equity and increase opportunities for others on a daily basis – not only for communities of color but also for LGBTQ+ communities, people with disabilities, women, religious groups, and all other people who may stand to benefit from active allyship. In our work as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) business strategists, what we often hear across our client spectrum is that most people want to take part and be helpful but still aren't sure how to translate those feelings into concrete actions.

As strategists, we also know that allyship is critical not only to social justice but to business success as well. In fact, research indicates that employees in organizations with cultures of inclusion and allyship are [50% less likely to leave](#), 75% less likely to take a sick day, 56% more likely to work to improve their performance, and up to 167% more likely to recommend their organization as a great place to work. That is to say, overall, employees at inclusive organizations are happier and more productive, creating a significant bottom-line impact.






These outcomes hold true across many different demographic groups. For instance, companies with greater gender, ethnic, and cultural diversity outperform others on profitability, and those that improve access and inclusion for employees with disabilities are [four times more likely to have shareholder returns that outperform those of their peer group](#). To reap those benefits – and to remain competitive in the modern marketplace – businesses must prioritize, understand, and teach active allyship in the workplace.

Which leads us back to this central challenge: people want to be active allies (for personal and professional reasons alike) but don't know how. Our intention in this guidebook is to help solve the problem, detailing the definition of, common roadblocks to, and methods and examples of successful active allyship, as well as prompts to spur reflection.

What is Active Allyship?

At The Diversity Movement, we've adopted global DEI leader [Sheree Atcheson's](#) definition of an ally as "any person [who] actively promotes and aspires to advance the culture of inclusion through intentional, positive, and conscious efforts that benefit people as a whole." The words we'd like to call attention to are "actively," "intentional," and "conscious." In other words, active allyship isn't a "one and done" event. Rather, it is an ongoing process.

Here, it is important to distinguish ally from other, similar terms such as activist, advocate, accomplice, bystander, and solidarity.

Activist 	A person who believes strongly in political or social change and takes part in activities such as public protests to try to make this happen.
Advocate 	Someone who publicly supports or suggests an idea, development, or way of doing something.
Accomplice 	Someone who assists others in creating a space of inclusion, equity, and safety for all, often at the risk of their own social and/or professional standing and physical well-being.
Bystander 	One who is present but not taking part in a situation or event: a chance spectator.
Solidarity 	Solidarity work is often quieter, deeper, and occurring behind the scenes. Acts of solidarity work to dismantle structures and institutions. Solidarity work may require us to give up power and/or to risk our physical safety, our jobs, our secure place in any social hierarchy, our friendships, and family relationships. Solidarity is talk and action.

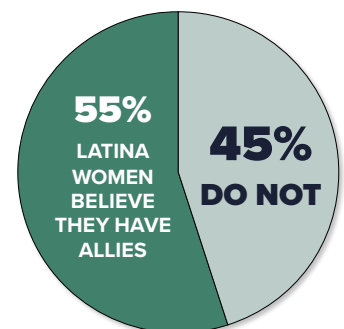
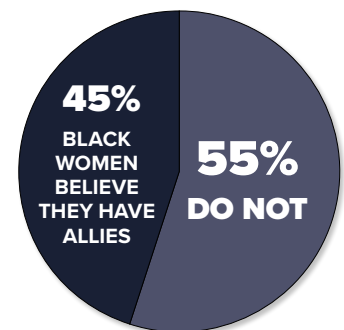
It's even more crucial to distinguish between active allyship and performative allyship, as both types seek to help underrepresented and marginalized groups but with very different motives.

As defined above, active allies take action to "benefit people as a whole." Performative allies, on the other hand, are driven by their own self interest, specifically to [promote their own individual, moralistic compass](#) or to be seen as an ally by others. They are most concerned with their own status and image: the perception of themselves to others. Common performative actions include speaking up or posting to social media without any substantive behind-the-scenes work. One recent example of this was Blackout Tuesday in 2020. (Read more about Blackout Tuesday's performative nature [here](#)).



Performative allyship is rampant and pervasive. To understand just how prevalent it is, we might start by comparing the number of people who self-identify as active allies with the number of people who are viewed as active allies by their colleagues from underrepresented and marginalized groups. One 2020 survey of over 7,400 U.S. adults, conducted by the Lean In organization, dove into this disparity. Its finding? That more than 80% of White employees view themselves as allies to women of color at work. Yet, just 45% of Black women and 55% of Latinas say they have strong allies in the workplace, showing a 35 and 25 percentage point difference, respectively.

These numbers – and others – show that education and training on active allyship are critical to creating inclusive work environments. People often think they are acting as allies simply by acting with civility when, in reality, allyship means intentionally and positively influencing culture to be more equitable and inclusive.



***Note:** Some individuals and communities may feel provoked, offended, annoyed, or exasperated by the term “ally.” Throughout history, whether it be for women’s rights, Black rights, LGBTQ+ rights, disability rights, or more, people – that is, allies – have made promises and statements of support that often came up empty. Thus, the word “ally” can carry feelings of distrust, resentment, or disappointment. We encourage you to be mindful of your word choice and use “ally” only when it relates to intentional action. Otherwise, one or many of the terms mentioned above, such as “solidarity” or “advocate,” may be more appropriate.

Who Can Be an Active Ally?

The short answer here is anyone! Anyone can be an ally! Allyship isn't confined to one race, gender identity, age, ability, or any other dimension of diversity. Rather, it is defined by the actions you take and the difference you are making.

We want to pause here to underscore the importance of White male allyship in particular. Yes, White men can be successful and impactful allies. In fact, research shows that White men are the [least likely to experience negative impacts from engaging in active allyship](#). Thus, White men might be some of the most impactful allies for creating change, as their efforts tend to be met with less pushback, resistance, or retaliation.

However, we also recognize that more than [one-third of White men are afraid to speak up](#) or join in on allyship efforts and feel uncertain about their role in DEI strategies, social movements for equity, and more. The key to encouraging [White men to act as intentional diversity allies](#) in the workplace is similar to our recommendation for encouraging all allyship and inclusion: create a safe space for ongoing education and courageous conversations.

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Now that we understand who can be an ally, let's look at which groups and communities those people can act as allies to. Certainly, all people have some level of [privilege they can pay forward](#) to help others, and each person faces a unique set of challenges and disadvantages as well. Beyond that fact, we've identified sixteen core groups whom we believe most often seek active allyship. These include Black people, Latine people, Asian people, Native American people, Indigenous people, LGBTQIAP+ people, refugee and immigrant people, people with disabilities (including mental health conditions and invisible illnesses), older professionals, women, veterans, working parents, formerly incarcerated people, first-generation students and professionals, religious groups, and people with [neurodiversity](#).





Each of these groups will experience allyship in its own unique way, as will each of the individuals who comprise these communities. Without additional research, we do not claim to know when, how, or where each group may stand to benefit most from active allies and their allyship. However, we do want to provide some specific examples of what allyship might look like. For instance:

- **Veterans** may need support transitioning to civilian life and translating their military skills into workplace skills. An ally might offer to help edit a veteran's resume or coach them on job interview skills.
- **Non-binary folks** often feel invisible and unacknowledged by workplace policies that use binary language, such as "he or she" and "men or women." An ally might advocate for the organization-wide use of genderless language such as "they" and "them."
- **Black Americans** are disproportionately killed by police. An ally might vote or lobby to end no-knock warrants.
- More than 3 million people use a **wheelchair** full time. You might notice that your local supermarket has a ramp installed, but the aisles are hard to navigate in a wheelchair. An ally might send a letter to the manager.

As we were writing this guide, the question of "who needs allies?" arose. As we discussed this topic, we paused to reconsider the term "need" and its connotations. After all, who are we to determine which groups need allies and why? While we've certainly heard folks from underrepresented groups use "need" in relation to the idea of allyship, we also recognize that no community is a monolith and that individuals within the same group might opt for different terms.

Common Roadblocks to Active Allyship

- 1. Lack of education and awareness.** Allyship must begin with education because you cannot change what you're unaware of, nor can you effectively help other people when you aren't aware of and educated about the issues that they are facing. Without education, you risk taking the wrong action and, potentially, making the issue even worse.
- 2. Bias.** We all have it! Bias is the brain's automatic way to make sense of the world around us every day. However, when we let our biases go unchecked, we often make assumptions and take actions that can cause harm to others. It's important to regularly check in with yourself and reflect on how bias might be impacting your decisions, perceptions, and actions.
- 3. Privilege.** Privilege itself isn't a bad thing. In fact, it can be used for good! However, when we don't understand our privilege, it is difficult, if not impossible, to leverage. Seek to [learn more about privilege](#), and consider one of The Diversity Movement's top-rated [privilege walks](#).
- 4. Fear.** Fear is a powerful deterrent to speaking up. Women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals often face backlash as a result of speaking out. For example, [when a Black person confronts a racist remark](#), they are viewed as "rude," while a White person who takes the same action is more often perceived as "persuasive." Despite the potential for negative repercussions, we can't always let fear rule our actions. It's important to pick and choose our battles and recognize when to push past fear.
- 5. Lack of confidence.** As with fear, people often hesitate to speak up when they lack confidence or feel uncomfortable. Consider this your DEI mantra – "get comfortable being uncomfortable" – because change doesn't happen when we stay within our comfort zones. It requires stepping outside of comfort to face our challenges and keep learning. And, going back to roadblock number one, education and awareness can increase confidence.
- 6. Silence.** If you've ever chosen to remain silent, rather than speak up, know that this behavior is common. In fact, it's absolutely universal. More likely than not, you can remember at least one time when you took the easier, less scary, more comfortable path, and remained silent. And that's ok, but it can't always be your approach. Allyship means understanding when to stay silent and when to speak up for other people, for yourself, or for the greater good. As evidenced by this list of roadblocks, allyship is not always easy, and you won't always get it right. However, silence is just as powerful as action, and we must not ignore its impact.



Methods of Active Allyship

Being cautious of these common roadblocks and pitfalls, let's take a look at active allyship practices you can implement as an individual and as an organization.

Individual

- **Listen.** Make sure you are actively listening to those you are trying to be an ally to. Listen to understand, not to respond. And never assume you know what someone else needs – ask.
- **Educate yourself and others.** As mentioned above, education is one of the largest barriers to allyship. Make sure you are knowledgeable about the issues facing the communities you want to serve.
- **Initiate and invite dialogue.** When you ask how you can help, ask genuine and thoughtful questions such as “What challenges are you facing, and how can I help?” Probing questions are also helpful when you want to speak up to someone who is acting non-inclusively. Some prompts include “what do you mean by that?” or “tell me why you think that.”
- **Mitigate bias.** Learn more about bias, and make a point to regularly reflect on how it might be impacting your day-to-day interactions. Harvard’s [Project Implicit](#) tool is a great place to start! And don’t shy away from calling in others when you think bias might be clouding their judgment. (Learn more about “calling in” versus “calling out” on page 12).
- **Recognize privilege, and use it for impact.** Use your power to speak up on behalf of those who might not have as strong a voice. Some key conversation starters include “I’ve been noticing that...” or “A trend I’ve been seeing in our company is...”
- **Use inclusive language.** Put people first; use universal phrases; recognize the impact of mental health language; use gender neutral language; be thoughtful about the imagery you use; and ask if you aren’t sure. Learn more best practices by reading [this guide](#).
- **Hold yourself and others accountable.** Have you committed yourself to being an active ally? If so, find an accountability buddy. Hold each other accountable to at least one significant action every month, whether that be attending a march, signing a petition, reading a book, or engaging in a courageous conversation.
- **Speak up, and speak out.** As educator and activist Jackson Katz states, “your voice is your vehicle.” Don’t be afraid to use it.
- **Amplify others’ voices.** Sometimes the best thing you can do is to make space for others to use their own voices. Rather than lending your opinion or thoughts, reshare those of someone within the community you are supporting.



- **Learn from your mistakes.** We all make mistakes on our DEI journeys, and that's ok. Remember, the best thing you can do is apologize and move on, taking note of how to avoid the same mistake moving forward.
- **Mentor and sponsor.** One of the most valuable actions that allies can take, especially for those who are in positions of privilege or power, is to mentor and/or sponsor folks from underrepresented or marginalized communities. Be an advocate for young women's success and promotion in your company, tutor students at HBCUs, or teach interview skills to folks on the Autism spectrum.
- **Be intentional with your resources.** Consider shopping at local businesses owned by historically-underrepresented groups. Consider where you buy your groceries, who you hire to renovate your home, where you purchase gifts, and so much more. Use your spending power to give back to the communities you aim to serve.

Organizational

* Adapted from (CWB) [*Elevating Allyship in the Workplace*](#)

- **Work to foster a culture of physical and psychological safety.** Tolerance is the biggest predictor of harassment. A no-tolerance policy must be modeled from the top down.
- **Adopt non-judgmental dialogue to nurture employees' confidence to use their voices.** Set ground rules for courageous conversations such as assuming positive intent and engaging in active listening.
- **Utilize the power of one-to-one conversation and listening sessions where employees have a chance to share their stories.** Supplement these sessions with an assessment tool to measure the effectiveness of your allyship initiatives.
- **Establish a culture of "calling people in" respectfully, collaboratively, and non-judgmentally.** However, remember that "calling people out" is sometimes the right answer depending on the situation.
- **Encourage leaders and employees alike to admit mistakes.**
- **Prioritize employees before profits.**
- **Ensure accountability on teams and among leadership.**
- **Thoughtfully design allyship programming and educational opportunities.** As you plan programming, make sure to include the group you are fostering allyship with.
- **Recognize the challenges of a virtual environment.** If your company is remote, it may be even harder for colleagues to form relationships and environments of inclusion. Be intentional about continuing to foster a positive company culture for all employees despite location.



Allyship in Action: A How-To Guide



Now, we'll dive further into two concepts we've previously touched on: courageous conversations and apologizing. First, let's take a moment to acknowledge that courageous conversations are hard. They literally require courage. Maybe you're going head-to-head with someone who has a vastly different point of view, or maybe you're engaging in a topic you're not familiar or comfortable with. Discomfort is common. Your discomfort is valid.

Luckily, we have a few conversation starters that you can use in these difficult moments. Before we say more, let's talk about ground rules. At The Diversity

Movement, we have seven rules we establish prior to any tough conversation. Depending on your organization, you might implement the same seven rules or adjust them slightly. These rules ensure a productive conversation, one free from judgment, anger, and harm.

They are:

1. Assume positive intent.
2. Engage in dialogue, not debate.
3. Hold yourself and others accountable for demonstrating cultural humility.
4. Be open, transparent, and willing to admit mistakes.
5. Embrace the power of humble listening.
6. Create trusting and safe spaces – spaces where a little bit of discomfort is okay.
7. Commit to having conversations that matter by speaking up to bridge divides.

Now, let's get specific. How do you hold a courageous conversation where you are speaking up on behalf of someone else? You can

1. **Use questions** like “can you explain what you meant when you said...?”
2. **Offer thoughtful suggestions**, such as “a more inclusive way to say that is...”
3. **Share your own vulnerability.** For example, share a time when you used non-inclusive language and what you did to correct it. You can also share a little about your allyship journey.
4. **Get comfortable being uncomfortable.** Being an active ally can cause discomfort; do not let the discomfort become a roadblock to action.



Also, don't let tip number two (offer thoughtful suggestions) prevent you from engaging in tip number one (use questions). Just because you don't have a suggestion at the moment doesn't mean you can't initiate a conversation. In fact, sometimes all you need is step one. Often, once probed, a person will recognize their mistake and correct themselves without further guidance.

And remember, it is always okay to step away from a conversation that you feel is unproductive. Try something along the lines of

I see this is not a productive conversation for us. I felt it important to discuss XYZ with you because _____. Thank you for your time. I am always available to continue this conversation in the future.

That phrase "because _____" is crucial here and offers an opportunity to tie the conversation back to your organization's values. For instance, if your organization values a growth mindset, frame your feedback as an opportunity for growth; or if your organization values transparency, explain that your feedback is in the spirit of transparency. Doing so places the emphasis on change as a means to work toward organizational goals.

Calling in versus calling out

“Calling out” and “calling in” are both tools that can be used to hold ourselves and others accountable for harmful actions, behaviors, and words. Both these tools work to disrupt privilege and bias. Here’s how they differ.

Calling Out	Calling In
More forceful and direct; makes it clear that harmful behaviors will not be tolerated. Often involves acknowledging a person’s behavior in a public forum for public accountability.	More private and more reflective. It offers the offending person an opportunity to explore their actions and reconsider ideas, words, and behaviors.
Necessary when someone is making a blatantly discriminatory comment or action towards someone else, with the intention of harming them. Necessitates an in-the-moment response to divert harm.	The better option when any situation presents an opportunity for reflection, finding mutual understanding, considering other perspectives, and/or learning something new. Perhaps someone makes a comment where their intention is not clear or presents an idea that could be interpreted in more than one way. An effective way to address this moment is to ask reflective questions such as how they came to their conclusion or to explain how their behavior can be harmful to others. Calling in gives room for the other person to acknowledge and learn from their mistake, and it’s another step forward in fostering an inclusive environment.

Now, let’s talk about apologizing. As we mentioned before, the best thing you can do when you make a mistake is apologize and move on, taking note of how to avoid the same mistake in the future. There are two primary parts to an effective apology: the apology itself, and the personal action item. First, apologize for what happened in the moment, then explain how you’ll remedy it in the future. Both steps are important to ensure the apology is direct and actionable. Often, apologies can feel vague and empty, so assigning an actionable purpose to the apology makes it much more authentic and impactful.

In order to ensure you hit both points, you can utilize the script below, [adapted from Amber Cabral](#).

I am sorry for _____. In the future I will _____.

For instance... “I am sorry for referring to you as handicapped. In the future, I will use the term Deaf, and only when it’s relevant to the conversation.”

Or “I am sorry for wearing a sombrero. In the future, I will be more mindful of cultural appropriation.”

It’s important that you don’t brush off your mistake but also don’t over apologize. Over apologizing can look like “I am soooooo sorry. I really wasn’t raised like that. I can’t believe I said that.” Although often well-intentioned, apologies such as these can place the burden on the offended person to comfort their offender, adding to the offended person’s emotional burden.

Finally, remember, your mistake is not an invitation to open a line of questioning directed toward the person you offended. We see this mistake a lot. You make a mistake, you apologize for it, the person forgives you, and then there’s an awkward pause, followed by “well since we are on the topic of X, I’d love your thoughts on XYZ.” For example, maybe you misgendered a transitioning colleague and, rather than moving on, use the moment to ask them about their transition. While there might be a time and place for this conversation, it’s not now. Like over apologizing, opening a line of questions puts an undue emotional burden on the offended person, who might already be feeling emotionally sapped after your mistake. Be mindful of follow-up questions and additional conversations in the moment. For more on this topic, read our blog, [“I Accidentally Misspoke; Now What?”](#)



Reflection

We've covered a lot of details about what it means to be an active ally and how to show up on a day-to-day basis. Here, we invite you to pause and reflect on the questions below.

Name an instance when someone has acted as an ally to you. How did it help you? How did it make you feel?

What, if anything, has prevented you from being an active ally so far?

What method of allyship is your strongest, and which method has the most room for growth?

How can you show up as an ally in your day-to-day life?

Think of a courageous conversation you have been part of in the past. What was the experience like for you?

Call to Action



To close out this guidebook, we want to encourage immediate action to jumpstart your path toward becoming an active ally. Below are 4 steps you can take in the next 30 days:

- 1.** Take time to identify what is actionable and attainable. Maybe this includes donating to a nonprofit or charitable organization or drafting a sponsorship plan for your business. It's okay to start small and grow from there.
- 2.** Ask a family member, friend, or colleague to join you in this practice so you can hold each other accountable for success.
- 3.** Think, listen, educate yourself, and commit to moving forward. We are not perfect, and we don't need to be perfect to make a positive, permanent impact.
- 4.** Ask for help when you need it.

Remember that you are on an ongoing journey. Take your time and know that each thought, act, and conversation is impactful. You will make mistakes because mistakes are human. What is key is to accept your own mistakes as learning moments and commit to do better next time.

Just like with any other diversity initiative, change often isn't immediate but happens gradually over time. Don't let yourself get discouraged by the pace. Stay steadfast in your resolution to enact change, and take solace in the fact that your active allyship is seen and valued.

Interested in training your organization on active allyship? Contact info@thediversitymovement.com to inquire about our guided session on allyship led by Susie Silver.

ABOUT THE DIVERSITY MOVEMENT

The Diversity Movement is a results-oriented, data-driven strategic partner for organization-wide culture change through diversity, equity, and inclusion. Our team of experts provides a customized mix of online learning, tools, events, and consulting services that help our partners create future-focused, employee-centered cultures and better business outcomes.



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