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How To Be An Ally For Colleagues Of Color At Work: Three Do's And Don'ts For Taking Action



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Entrepreneurs



Allyship of sympathy isn't very useful. What does it mean to offer allyship of legitimate action? GETTY

The stories bore a striking similarity, despite coming from different women, in different places, at different times. The women, young Black professionals, spoke about their first jobs out of college. They worked long hours, trying to get ahead. But when it came time for a promotion, the new role went to a less qualified white woman.

“You have to ask,” says Dr. Dawn Harris Jeffries, who collected these stories as part of her [doctoral research](#), “if these young Black women had been white, would the outcome have been different?”

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Harris Jeffries’ stories caught our attention because we’d like to think, if we were the hiring managers in the same situations, we’d recognize the capacity and qualifications of the young Black professionals and promote them. As white leaders, we want to believe we’re good allies for our colleagues of color at work.

But are we? In a [June 2020 LeanIn.org and SurveyMonkey poll](#), over 80% of white people polled said they were an ally to colleagues of color; however, relatively few of the Black and Latinx women polled said white colleagues were their strongest allies.

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“If you’re not sincerely supporting and advocating for African American women, then you’re not really an ally,” says Harris Jeffries. “You may actually be an unwitting adversary.”

Allyship in action

In the wake of George Floyd’s death, many white leaders rallied to fight racism and build inclusive organizations. We ordered (and sometimes read) books on being an anti-racist; we attended webinars and protests; we talked in exasperated tones about how this change had been too long in coming. But have we really helped to move the needle?

“An allyship of sympathy isn’t very useful,” says Dr. Stephanie Creary, assistant professor of management at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania.

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How do we go beyond sympathy to help create meaningful change?

The two of us are white, and we certainly don’t have all the answers, but here are three simple “do’s” and three simple “don’ts” we’ve recently learned from colleagues of color that may be helpful.

The don’ts of being an ally

1. Don’t assume you are an ally

“Ally” is a label you earn, not give yourself. Your perception of how you’re doing as an ally might not align with how your Black and Brown colleagues perceive you, as the LeanIn.org and SurveyMonkey poll indicates. Instead, consider saying that you are “trying to be an ally” or are “working on being an ally.” The language shift is subtle, but it signals your willingness to be coached and to place yourself in the role of a learner.

2. Don’t be paternalistic

When someone who is accustomed to being in a position of privilege steps into a situation, it can be easy for that person to assume they have the answers and know how the situation should be fixed. That is an easy trap to fall into for white leaders when attempting to address issues of racism, diversity, and inclusion in the workplace, and it usually leads to misguided direction and erosion of trust.

“The person in the lower position of privilege may not want to accept allyship if it comes from a place of paternalism or ‘I know better than you and will save you,’” says Wharton’s Creary.

Instead, admit that you don't have all the answers, commit to long-term effort, and then consider asking questions like "what do I need to know," "how can I help," and "what can we do together?"

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3. *Don't speak for others*

Finally, while white allies need to be quick to speak up in support of diversity, equity, and inclusion, it's a mistake to try and speak for our diverse colleagues. Instead, we need to help create the kinds of conditions in which our Black and Brown colleagues can speak for themselves.



Legitimate allyship couples words and action. Even better, strong allies make opportunities for ... [+] GETTY

The do's of being an ally

1. *Do take ally-like actions*

Instead of labeling yourself an ally, put your energy into action. Show your commitment to allyship with consistent behaviors.

In a study of 124 pairs of lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) employees and their heterosexual colleagues, Dr. Arjun Mitra of California State University, Los Angeles, found that LGB individuals perceive their colleagues as *legitimate allies* when the colleagues take consistent action. What kind of actions signaled an ally? Attending a resource group, confronting individuals who

harass or discriminate, or taking public action such as marching in a Pride Parade.

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Mitra suggests a question colleagues can ask: “Am I showing, not just saying, I’m an ally?”

While Mitra’s research looks at ally legitimacy for LGB colleagues, we suspect it is applicable in terms of race as well. It is certainly echoed in the comments of diversity scholar Dr. Salwa Rahim-Dillard, founder of Equision Consulting. At a recent event hosted by the [Center for Values-Driven Leadership](#) at Benedictine University, Rahim-Dillard, suggested a list of [ally behaviors people in positions of leadership can take](#):

- Challenge your companies on their board and their C-suite composition;
- Examine your company’s talent management practices;
- Ask for an annual audit of pay equity, performance ratings, voluntary and involuntary exits;
- Do engagement surveys of Black and Brown people;
- Insist on standardized talent acquisition practices;
- Require at least two Black and Brown. candidates on the slate;
- Use structured interview guides and a diverse interview panel;
- Use metrics and leader expectations;
- Influence the high visibility projects, the mentoring, the sponsorship, and the high potential programs;
- Ask about succession planning and the promotion of Black and Brown employees;

- Disrupt your own biases and challenge unsubstantiated feedback during talent reviews;
- Address micro-aggressions;
- If you're planning meetings, ask who's not at the table;
- Give fair and frequent high-quality feedback to Black and Brown colleagues; and
- Stay committed because being anti-racist is an iterative process that requires lifelong learning.

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2. Do lead through asking questions

As mentioned above, instead of positioning yourself as a savior, admit you don't have all the answers, commit to long-term effort, and use questions to strengthen your allyship. In a recent [Harvard Business Review article on being a better ally](#), Wharton's Creary encourages aspiring allies to ask Black colleagues about their work and their professional goals.

“To improve the quality of your relationships with your Black colleagues, ask them about their actual work, including what they are hoping to accomplish, any concerns they have about doing that, and how you might be able to help them reach their vision,” she writes.

In Creary's current research, she's asking individuals to share stories of when someone has been an ally to them, and when they've been an ally to others. Those two simple questions, if asked in your workplace, might yield incredible ideas of how colleagues could support one another.

3. Do make it possible for diverse colleagues to speak for themselves

We want to close with a story of allyship in action that perfectly illustrates this final point. This story comes from Dr, Dawn Harris Jeffries, whose research we mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Not long ago, an organization's advisory board wanted to understand the perspective of their Black associates. They could have conducted a survey or had a few conversations and brought the insights back to the group. Instead, one white ally said, "Let's make a seat at the table."

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Harris Jeffries was invited to take that seat. "An ally knows to open the door and put a seat at the table, not carry back the message. Let me speak for myself," she says.

Making a seat at the table acknowledges the competence of Black and Brown leaders and gives them an opportunity to have their own voice, rather than speaking through a "white interpreter." It allows people of color to influence the overall process, rather than just commenting on it at one point in time. It gives diverse individuals access to decision-making conversations and brings their professional capability and personal perspectives into shaping the future. It helps African American leaders earn the attention they need to advance through the organization.

That is allyship in action. We need more of it.

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