Chapter 8

Allyship: How to Positively Impact the Culture and Practices in Your Firm

Genhi Givings Bailey*

What Is Allyship and What Does It Mean to Be an Ally?

Allyship is the act of standing up for others who are different from you to help disrupt the bias and barriers they experience. Allies can help raise the awareness of issues that adversely impact a community or help amplify an individual person’s voice. This is especially valuable in situations where individuals are in the minority and their diverse identities have been marginalized or minimized.

The term *ally* became popular about fifteen years ago in the LGBTQ+ community in reference to heterosexual people who

* Genhi Givings Bailey is Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer at Perkins Coie LLP.
were using their actions to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ equality and inclusion. The concept has gained traction more recently as an effective way to help interrupt systemic inequalities and help advance principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in society and in workplaces.

Being an ally means you are leveraging your privilege (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, education, and socio-economic status to name a few) and offering your influence and voice to help advocate for the interests of underrepresented or marginalized individuals and communities. We have seen allies show up more recently in social movements such as Black Lives Matter where white people (and others) have stood up with Black people to protest police brutality. Or, in Times Up where men have stood up with women in support of gender equality. Or, in the LGBTQ+ community where heterosexual and cisgender individuals have stood up for the rights of lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, and gender nonconforming or nonbinary individuals.

These are just a few examples of allyship in action in American society; however, allies also exist and are critical to advancing diversity, inclusion, and belonging goals in the workplace, including law firms and corporate legal departments. In fact, allies can be enormously effective in the workplace as individual agents of change. The small, yet consistent, actions taken by many allies working toward a common goal can positively impact the culture and practices of an organization and be additive to enterprise-wide strategies such as those led by Diversity and Inclusion departments.

**Who Can Be an Ally?**

Anyone! Everyone! You! The great thing about allyship is that we can all be allies for others. We all have privileges that we can leverage or use to help promote others and to advocate for them. But it is important to understand that allyship is not a
Allyship

You don’t just wake up one day and declare, “I’m going to be the best ally!” Allyship is a behavior that you are always working to improve. It is also a behavior that you can begin at any time, including now. One of the best things about allyship is that, in addition to making an impact on the lives of others, it is an opportunity to learn more about yourself along the way. In many ways, allyship is as much about your own growth and development as it is about advocating for others.

Guidelines for Being an Effective Ally

Below are guidelines for beginning or refining your approach to allyship as well as a few pitfalls to avoid. Spoiler alert: a big part of being an effective ally means being self-aware and doing a lot of self-reflection!

Identify Your Blind Spots

Having a blind spot means you are not aware of a particular bias (also known as unconscious or implicit bias), or that you believe you do not hold a particular bias. We all have implicit biases and are all prone to blind spots. Instead of denying them it is better to learn where they lie and how they may be getting in the way of your ability to better understand and engage with people who are different from you. Until you have an awareness of where your blind spots lie it can be difficult to see others as the individuals they are and to appreciate and demonstrate value for each person’s unique experiences and contributions.

There are many resources to help you uncover your blind spots, including several podcasts, TED Talks, *Harvard Business Review* articles, and books. However, the best place to start is to take the Harvard Implicit Association Test. Developed in 1998 and regularly updated, this free, online tool measures “implicit cognitive preferences—thoughts and feelings outside of conscious awareness and control” across ninety different topics.
As you begin to identify where your blind spots lie, commit to examining them more closely by engaging in more learning on these topics. Try to understand why you hold these biases and then start working to consciously interrupt them.

**Take Stock of Your Social and Professional Networks**

Consider who is in your “in group” and who is in your “out group.” Be honest with yourself and consider questions such as the following: How diverse is the mix of people that I choose to spend time with? How diverse is the mix of people that I work with? What do I know about those people’s lives outside of work? Do I know anything about their hopes, goals, and motivations? Who do I invite to my home for dinner? Who haven’t I invited? Who do I invite out for coffee, lunch, or happy hour? Conversely, who have I not invited to join me and others in these activities? Why not?

Consider, also, taking inventory of the social media you prefer, the podcasts you are listening to, and other online content you are reading. Do this for just one week and note how diverse are the perspectives and the voices you are listening to. Identify what is missing and what you are curious about and seek to fill those gaps.

**Listen More (Talk Less!)**

If active listening is new to you, this is a great time to start practicing. Active listening is essentially the practice of being present in the moment and consciously listening to the other person. This means you are not multitasking on your phone, or thinking about your next question or comment or, worse yet, thinking about something completely unrelated to what the other person is talking about. You are simply listening to that
person. And maybe giving social cues that you are engaged and interested such as an occasional head nod or smile. But that’s it!

Admittedly, this is not easy—it requires practice and effort. But like most things, the more you do it, the better you will get. Personally, I have found that one of the greatest rewards of active listening is that I hear so much more, and my understanding and recollection of the details is better than when I’m engaging in distracted listening. This is all valuable to becoming an effective ally.

An important note about what you are hearing while listening: when someone shares a perspective or experience with you, even if you find it hard to believe, believe them! Sometimes, when we do not have the same shared experiences it is difficult for us to accept or understand someone else’s experience, but that does not give us the right to challenge them on the issue. For example, if a colleague tells you that she feels she was treated differently because of her race, don’t say, “I don’t think it’s about race at all” or “Not everything is about race, you know” (both of which I have heard). If your colleague says it’s about race, then it is about race for her. You should not challenge her experiences and her reaction to those experiences. That’s not allyship! An effective ally leans in, asks questions, listens without judgment, and seeks to understand.

**Get Comfortable Being Uncomfortable**

Along the path of developing as an ally, you will have some uncomfortable moments where you don’t know what to say or how to react. You will also make some mistakes. This is all perfectly fine. In fact, if you don’t experience any discomfort or don’t make any mistakes, you probably are not doing enough work. As you learn more about yourself and other people and their experiences, you will become more aware of the many societal and institutional inequities that exist. You will become
more attuned to how these inequities perpetuate the marginalization of certain groups, and you will want to help change these things. But you will likely experience some frustration because change is difficult, and it takes time.

As you raise your own consciousness, you will also hear insensitive and offensive comments toward others differently. You may even hear these comments from peers and people you respect and not know how to react in the moment. You will also, unintentionally, say something insensitive or even offensive yourself for which you will need to apologize.

All these things, and more, will happen and they will make you feel uncomfortable. But don’t give up. Don’t retreat. Press on and lean into these moments. When you see the systemic inequities in your organization (e.g., any policies, programs, or processes that are biased against certain groups), question and challenge them and offer better solutions. When you hear the offensive comments from others, ask them what they mean by it, or point out how the comment is offensive. And when you yourself “step in it” and say something insensitive (we all do at some point or another!), apologize. Be humble and apologize. The impact of a heartfelt, genuine apology is powerful. All these actions can be taken in the moment or done later, after you have had the opportunity to collect your thoughts about how you want to address it. The timing of your action is less important than the fact that you find the courage, fight through the discomfort, and act in the first place. This is allyship.

**Avoid the Savior and Sympathy Modes**

Be clear about your motivations for being an ally. You should not want to be an ally because you want to save people, and you should not want to be an ally because you feel sorry for people. The award-winning psychologist and author, Dolly Chugh, calls these the savior and sympathy modes. In her book, *The Person You Mean to Be*, Chugh posits that when in savior mode,
we approach the issue as a problem to solve and “we forget that there are real people behind the problems.” When in sympathy mode, our actions are more charitable in nature and have the effect of disempowering the very person we are trying to advocate for. Both modes are driven by our egos without regard for the impact of our actions on the individual. If you find yourself in either one of these modes, try to redirect your actions toward the individual and consider what actions will empower that person. One possible solution is to ask the person what their preferences are. For instance, if in a meeting you notice a colleague’s comments are being ignored or credited to someone else, instead of speaking up for her in the moment, after the meeting you might mention to her that you noticed what was happening and ask if she would appreciate you saying something if it happens again. Even if she says no, you are signaling to her that you are an ally and you have successfully averted the pitfalls of the savior mode.

**Act!**

Whether you are using your voice to advocate for someone or to help amplify another person’s voice, or you are protesting in the streets against Asian xenophobia or in favor of transgender rights, or you are making recommendations for policy changes to mitigate bias, you are acting as an ally. As you have probably figured out by now, there are numerous ways of being an effective ally and they can all have an impact. The most important thing is that you act and do something to help interrupt the biases and dismantle the barriers to success that many people experience. The work will be ongoing, and it will require courage, but by acting in support of more inclusive workplaces and communities you can make a difference.
Examples of Allyship

The following three examples are inspired by real-life situations (all names are fictional).

Example 1

Joshua, a cisgender male, is at a client meeting with several other lawyers, including Sidney who everyone on Joshua’s team knows is gender nonconforming and uses the pronouns they, them, and theirs. However, the client keeps referring to Sidney as she or her, the female gender pronouns. Joshua wants to correct the client during the meeting, but he is not sure if this is the best thing to do. What should he do? Unless Joshua has talked to Sidney about what to do in similar situations before, and they gave Joshua permission to speak up and make the corrections on their behalf, the best thing for Joshua to do is to wait until the meeting is over and then to check with Sidney to see what their preference is. Even if Sidney’s preference is that Joshua not say anything for them in these kinds of situations, Joshua has clearly signaled to Sidney that he is an ally, which is incredibly valuable. At this point, Joshua can also learn more about the gender nonconforming (or nonbinary) community on his own. Joshua may also decide it makes sense to invite a diversity and inclusion professional to speak to the other lawyers on his team so that they all learn more; thereby fostering a more inclusive environment for Sidney.

Example 2

Lisa, a white female, is on the associate hiring committee for her office and she notices that the overwhelming number of candidates that are invited to interview
Allyship

at the firm are also white. Further, she notices that the resumés of many of the candidates of color are scrutinized more carefully than the others. What should Lisa do? As an ally, Lisa can speak up, share her observations, and question the committee’s practices. She can make recommendations that help the committee attract and recruit more diverse candidates. Lisa can also suggest that the committee receive implicit bias training that will help them more equitably review all candidates and make decisions on who to hire. Questioning the status quo to help disrupt biased systems and processes is an act of allyship.

Example 3

In the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, one of the unfortunate issues that has emerged in some parts of the United States is anti-Asian American harassment and xenophobia. In just a few months, thousands of Asian Americans have reported cases of harassment, including being called names and being spat on in public places. Several Asian American advocacy groups are responding by offering information and training to those who want to be “upstanders,” a form of allyship, instead of silent bystanders in our communities. This is an excellent opportunity for non-Asian people to get involved by learning more and using their voices and privilege to support the Asian American community. There are numerous webinars being hosted to share this information and offer opportunities for people to get involved. Michael, a Black American fifth-year associate in a large law firm, is planning to attend some of these trainings to learn more about what he can do to support the Asian American community.