
Why Allies Matter: The Role of Allies in Creating an Inclusive Work Environment

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You have probably heard the term ally before. Often times allies are most associated or known for their support and advocacy of the LGBT community. But an **Ally** is a person who actively supports, empowers and/or advocates for another person or group. Allies can work to mitigate bias, eliminate prejudice and fight inequality in our workplace and societies. In addition, allies can help create an environment where everyone feels welcome, supported and can contribute their best work. Allies are also key to an organization's ability to create a truly inclusive workplace. So what role can allies play in supporting your organization's diversity and inclusion strategy?

1. Provide Support - Allies can provide valuable support to individuals in marginalized groups who may not have the power, status, or opportunity to advocate for themselves. There are many ways allies offer support but one of the simplest is to listen, be open and create a safe space to make the person or group feel comfortable sharing in a non-judgmental environment.

2. Elevate the Importance of Inclusion - By leveraging peer relationships and by incorporating diversity and inclusion into everyday conversations, allies – particularly those in leadership positions - can send the message that non-inclusive behavior and/or discrimination will not be tolerated. When leaders speak about the importance of diversity and inclusion, share goals, wins and areas for improvement there is an increased likelihood that diversity and inclusion will be embedded across the organization. Leaders can leverage their privilege to make D&I everyone's priority.

3. Breakdown Barriers – Allies can be effective in providing career development and advancement opportunities for marginalized employees and can help break down barriers to success. Often times leaders will step up to sponsor an ERG of a different affinity. Serving in such a capacity allows leaders to understand some of the unique obstacles or challenges these ERG members are facing. Allies can also host courageous conversation dialogue sessions to create an environment where colleagues can have difficult conversations in a respectful way.

4. Serve as Role Models – By modeling inclusive behavior allies can influence a shift in cultural norms. Allies can stand up to ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect without exception. This can be as simple as making a new employee feel welcome and included or serving on a D&I specific task force or committee.

5. Shape the Behavior of Others – Allies have an opportunity to educate others in the organization about inclusion and the behaviors that can distract from an inclusive workplace. Have you ever been in a conversation and someone has made a remark that is offensive toward another individual or group? Allies have the opportunity to educate others on why their comment was offensive or inappropriate. Allies can help individuals build their Leads Self competency by making them aware of their words or actions and how they are impacting others.

6. Advocate for Change – Individuals outside the group impacted by non-inclusive behavior or policies can more effectively advocate for change in a way that can be heard and with less personal risk. As someone outside of the group, an ally has the opportunity to advocate in a way that does not appear sensitive or self-serving. Several years ago, a Veteran's ERG was working to obtain paid time off for their Veteran employees on Veteran's day. After months of failed attempts, the leader of the ERG mentioned it to a Senior leader in the organization. That leader picked up the phone and called HR and within a couple of weeks they instituted the change in benefits.

Allies are key partners in supporting an organization's diversity and inclusion strategy, can advocate for real change and create an inclusive work environment. It's important to note that anyone can be an ally, regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation or position in the organization. Take a few moments to think about how you can effect positive change in your role as an ally.

Erica Colonero is the co-founder and partner of VisionSpring, Inc. VisionSpring, Inc. is a WBENC certified women owned and operated diversity and inclusion consulting firm offering fully integrated strategy development, workforce planning, training and continuous learning solutions to leverage diversity and inclusion to drive innovation and improved business outcomes. We provide customized strategic solutions that address the specific needs of each client and blend workforce, workplace, marketplace and community related goals.