

Ashurst

Being a proactive
ally at Ashurst
– a guide

Outpacing change

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Introduction

As a global firm, Ashurst operates not only across a diverse range of jurisdictions and cultures, but has an equally diverse array of people working side by side within each office. For everyone to feel truly comfortable, respected and able to bring their whole self to work, we all need to play our part in creating an inclusive and supportive environment. If we can do this successfully, we will benefit from all the advantages which diversity brings to an organisation, its business and its people.

One key way to achieve this culture of inclusion is to focus on all that people can do as active Allies.

What is an ally?

Allies are people who:

- recognise the importance of acceptance and inclusion for all;
- actively articulate their support and amplify the voices of those who are under-represented, less noticed and less heard;
- call out any unacceptable/unhelpful behaviour or language and stand up for others (even when it feels uncomfortable to do so);
- are mindful not to use presumptive language or stereotypes and have an important role in challenging prejudice where they find it; and
- recognise their own privilege and use that privilege for the benefit of those who lack it.



Spotlight

I overheard a colleague telling a group of people about their recent holiday and they described a negative event as “lame”. While I knew they did not mean to cause offence to anyone, I recognised this to be an ableist term.

Ally action: Following the conversation, I asked the individual if they knew the meaning of the term. I let them know that while I knew they did not mean to cause offence, ‘lame’ is an ableist term and may be offensive to people who have difficulty walking. They thanked me for pointing this out and explained they hadn’t considered the potential impacts of this language and will be more mindful of this going forward.

I was anxious about sharing my unique family situation with my leader and team. I worried about being judged and if work life balance was truly possible to help support me as a single parent who has caring responsibilities for my child and a sibling who has a mental illness.

Ally action: My direct leader put my mind at ease when they shared their personal caring responsibilities and explained the advocacy of flexible working within the firm and other supports that are available to me. I’ve been able to integrate work life balance in such a caring, empowered and trusting way that my family and career are thriving because of it.





Being an ally in practice

The support Allies provide can take many forms. In addition to the issues set out above, you might advocate for a change in the law, choose to attend diversity and inclusion events organised by networks or outside organisations, or keep up to date with developments and news for a particular strand of diversity.

Allies are not expected to be experts on all things nor to fully understand what it feels like to be part of an under-represented group – but they do recognise the importance of equality, fairness, acceptance and respect and share a common desire to create an inclusive environment for all. Ideally, they take on issues personally, as though the struggle were their own.

Best practice for Allies:

Do

learn (and unlearn) – mistakes are to be expected; just ensure that you acknowledge, own and learn from yours;

your research – use the global hubs on the intranet, external sources and your own initiative to educate yourself rather than expecting those affected to do the work (and relive uncomfortable or painful experiences) for you;

be aware of your implicit biases (attend unconscious bias training or complete the online module, go to the Harvard Implicit Association Test [website](#));

use your privilege to amplify (digitally and in-person) historically suppressed voices;

learn how to listen and accept criticism with grace, even if it's uncomfortable; and

remember that just as society will not change overnight, neither will you or your colleagues – so keep going!

Do not

worry about being labelled “ist” (racist, sexist etc) – you have been shaped and influenced by the system around you – (but see previous section about mistakes);

take credit for the labour of those who are marginalized and did the work before you stepped into the picture;

Think of this issue as a competition in which you need to demonstrate that you too have experienced disadvantage; you may well have overcome obstacles, but as a member of a dominant group it is not helpful to make comparisons with someone from a marginalised group

behave as though you know best;

assume that every member of an under-represented community feels oppressed; and

expect to be taught or shown – take responsibility for this yourself.

What to do when you get it wrong as an ally

The best ways of learning are through listening, being open minded and acknowledging when we get it wrong. If someone points out an issue with an Ally's language, behaviour or attitudes, that is an excellent opportunity to learn.

You may have noticed it's easier to handle being corrected about something you didn't know if you're grateful for and even open to the opportunity to learn rather than embarrassed to have been wrong. Being able to let go of your ego is an incredibly important skill to develop.

Try starting with "Thanks for letting me know" to put yourself in a better frame of mind. If, after you say that, you need to take some time to think about the situation, that's fine, too. Just remember that this isn't about changing the other person's frame of mind. They're allowed to be upset – and your intention is irrelevant, it's the impact on the other person which dictates whether it's appropriate or not (within reason, of course).

But these issues are often so charged in our society that it is difficult to remember this when you are in the middle of the situation.

Reframing

Reframing the situation so that you don't feel defensive can be helpful: imagine your privilege is a heavy boot that keeps you from feeling when you're stepping on someone's feet or they're stepping on yours, while less privileged individuals are wearing sandals. If someone says, "ouch! You're stepping on my toes" – how do you react?

It's easier to think about stepping on someone's literal toes than it is to think about oppression or disadvantage – the following examples may help you to see some of the issues and the kind of unconstructive responses people can be tempted to come up with when it's hard for them to see – or acknowledge – their part in the problem:

- **Centering yourself:** "I can't believe you think I'm a toe-stepper! I'm a good person!"
- **Denial that others' experiences are different from your own:** "I don't mind when people step on my toes."
- **Derailing:** "Some people don't even have toes, why aren't we talking about them instead?"
- **Refusal to center the impacted:** "All toes matter!"
- **Tone policing:** "I'd move my foot if you'd ask me more nicely."
- **Denial that the problem is fixable:** "Toes getting stepped on is a fact of life. You'll be better off when you accept that."
- **Victim blaming:** "You shouldn't have been walking around in sandals!"
- **Withdrawing:** "I thought you wanted my help, but I guess not. I'll just go home."

More constructive responses

In reality, most of us naturally know the right way to react when we step on someone's toes, and we can use that to help us learn how to react when we commit microaggressions.

- **Center the impacted:** "Are you okay?"
- **Listen to their response and learn.**
- **Apologize for the impact, even though you didn't intend it:** "I'm sorry!"
- **Stop the instance:** move your foot
- **Stop the pattern:** be careful where you step in the future. When it comes to oppression, we want to actually change the "footwear" to get rid of privilege and oppression (sneakers for all!), but metaphors can only stretch so far!

Reacting in a fair and helpful way isn't about learning arbitrary rules or being a doormat. When we take the politics out of it, it's just the reasonable thing to do.



Spotlight

Coming from a working class background, I don't always feel comfortable attending networking events as it is not something I have had much experience on. I'm worried that I'm not getting enough visibility with clients and more senior members of the team.

Ally action: My colleague noticed that I was not joining in and asked if there was something they could do to help. They offered to brief me ahead of any events or meetings to make sure that I knew what to expect. They also introduced me to a few people at the beginning and gave me the confidence to network. We discussed who we had met and any agreed follow up actions. These pointers were helpful and made me more confident to put myself out there.

A light skinned First Nations employee recently started in the team and I overheard another team member remark that they don't look Aboriginal.

Ally action: Having participated in a webinar that explored this topic, I knew that measuring First Nations identity is an offensive and antiquated concept. I took the person aside and explained what I had learned and referred them to a few resources that I had found useful.

As a junior woman, sometimes I get spoken over in meetings or my comments are rephrased and expressed again by a more senior colleague. While this is often done unconsciously and without any malicious intent, it feels my contributions are not always taken on board.

Ally action: When this happened again on a Skype meeting, one of the senior leaders on the call thanked me for my comments ensuring that the contribution was credited to me. This was done so gently that it didn't disrupt the conversation but it had an impact of my confidence and I felt my voice had been amplified.



What to do as an ally when someone else gets it wrong

If you're a man who supports gender equality at work, or a straight person who supports the rights of the LGBTI+ community, or a white person who is anti-racist – ask yourself if you tolerate bad behaviour from your peers. Active confrontation of other people for stereotyping, bias, harassment, and all manner of inappropriate behaviours may be the toughest part of allyship, but it's critical to creating an equitable workplace.

Here are a few strategies you can use next time you witness a transgression.

The two-second rule: After someone says something offensive, take a beat to formulate a clear thought. You might say something like, "Did you really mean to say that?," or "That wasn't funny," or even a more direct, "That was sexist."

Deploy a thoughtful question: For example, if a senior colleague from a dominant group repeats a point that a more junior person from an underrepresented group previously made, you might query how that is different from what the junior person had suggested?

Share a personal story: how bias or stereotyping has been harmful to you or someone close to you. "My partner experienced this at work, and it's unacceptable. I don't want others to experience that here." This kind of openness can push your peers to do a double take, seeing their own behaviour through a new lens and giving them impetus to change.





Spotlight

Working on a project requiring late night meetings, a colleague comments on how one team member is not “pulling their weight”. The team member has shared that they are Muslim and during Ramadan they work flexibly to ensure that they can break their fast with their family.

Ally action: I did not want the rest of the team to think that the individual was slacking off so I explained the situation, but I knew it was not the first comment the colleague has made in relation to religious observances so I felt that I had to also speak to them separately. They hadn't appreciated how their comments had come across and ensured they would be more mindful going forward.

Moving into a new team, I was very nervous about disclosing my previous experience with stress and anxiety in case others thought less of me or assumed I could not cope with challenging work.

Ally action: When a supervisor shared with me they had their own experience of poor mental health on occasions, and explained what they did to maintain a positive mental state, they gave me permission to speak frankly. They had a feeling that I was struggling but rather than ‘calling me out’, they found a really practical way to facilitate a discussion which put my mind at rest.

Having worked at the firm for a number years, I have noticed that many of the talented ethnically diverse colleagues that started with me have not remained at the firm and I could not pinpoint to any obvious reasons why this was the case.

Ally action: Wanting to understand the reasons behind this, I signed up to the firm's reverse mentoring programme. The insights I gained from my reverse mentor helped me to recognise the barriers that can hinder the progression of ethnically diverse people in the organisation and understand where I can use my privilege to champion my junior colleagues.

As a new joiner, I was nervous about coming out in the workplace as this had created awkward conversations or prejudices amongst colleagues at my previous employer. Even simple conversations such as “what did you do at the weekend?” became difficult to navigate as I wasn't comfortable being open about my life.

Ally action: When I saw my new colleagues wearing rainbow lanyards in the office and overheard them discussing a Spectrum event they had attended, I started to feel more at ease. By identifying as active allies, they were making my day to day life at the firm a much more positive experience.



In summary, being an ally is:

- a key way to look out for, support and accept each other;
- a clear manifestation of our firm values; and
- an effective way of promoting an inclusive workplace.

To be an Ally requires that we do not simply notice an injustice, but also take action by calling out and affecting change. As allies, we are defined by our actions.

Allies within networks

Many of our networks already have initiatives in place to promote or support active allyship. To find out more, contact your local network lead or Tahlia Hedges (APAC) and Jay De Oliveira (EMEA/US).



Spectrum and Allies works together to support the LGBTI+ population of Ashurst and raise awareness of issues relating to and affecting the wider LGBTI+ community.



The Women's Networks provide a forum to exchange ideas and best practice and support the firm's gender diversity strategy.



The Family Matters network seeks to ensure that those with caring responsibilities have access to adequate tools and policies to thrive and develop in their careers, and that they feel supported in their responsibilities as carers.



All at Ashurst is the firm's multiculturalism network. The network celebrates and raises awareness of topics focusing on race and ethnicity, faith and culture. The Race and Ethnicity Equality Group and Ashurst Black Network sit under the All at Ashurst Network.



The Race and Ethnicity Equality Group aims to ensure that we create equality for all racially and ethnically diverse people at Ashurst. The group will identify ways in which to change how we do things relating to how we attract, recruit, promote and retain ethnically diverse talent at Ashurst.



The Ashurst Black Network aims to provide Ashurst's Black employees with a safe space to discuss issues pertinent to their experiences, champion inclusivity within the firm, support diversifying recruitment, and establish mentorship programmes for Black employees in order to support retention.



The disABILITY network promotes awareness and understanding of disability issues in the workplace, covering both physical disability and the promotion of positive mental health.



The Social Mobility Network aims to identify, discuss and address issues affecting the recruitment and retention of individuals who do not have a 'typical' or 'traditional' background and who may not meet traditional assessment standards.

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