



Being an Effective Ally in Countering Racism

Why this Section is Important

Most of the work done in countering racism, particularly institutional or systemic racism, needs to be done collectively – collaboratively - in relationship. One of the critical relationships, and one that is deceptively challenging, is the relationship between White and Black allies. This section focuses on that ally relationship from the White person’s perspective.

- I. Definition – Being an Ally
- II. The Central Pitfall
- III. Elements in the Profile of an Effective Ally

I

Definition - Being an Ally

Here are a couple of basic perspectives of being an ally in countering racism.

- Nicole Asong Nfonoyim-Hara, the Director of the Diversity Programs at Mayo Clinic, defines the act of allyship as "when a person of privilege works in solidarity and partnership with a marginalized group of people to help take down the systems that challenge that group's basic rights, equal access, and ability to thrive in our society."
- Rather than an identity, allyship is a practice that needs ongoing work and focus.

What About Other Terms than Ally?

Terms such as “accomplice” and “co-conspirator” are frequently used to indicate a more aggressive stance with stronger efforts to counter institutional or systemic racism than “ally.”

However, “ally” is used here, as a term defining a relationship that is committed to focused, powerful, sustained action. That action can be focused on racism as it exists for individuals, in interpersonal relationships, or in organizations or communities of any scale. Being an

ally is about aligning for effective action and requires courage, commitment, perseverance, and resilience.

II.

The Central Pitfall

Given the difficulty and complexity of the challenge to counter racism, we must bring all of our capabilities to the role of ally if we are to be effective allies, yet that is discouraged in most of the literature on being an ally. This discouraging message is framed in various ways, but a common way to think about it is the message to be a “sidekick” vs. a “savior.”

Not all of the discouraging messages are framed that boldly, but the message is the same, which undermines the ability to be an effective ally and work together to make a difference. There are multiple problems with this framing, and they need to be overcome to have any chance of creating effective ally relationships.

- “Sidekick” is cute but diminishing and also gives White people a way out of fully committing - “I just need to be a sidekick?”
- “Savior” is grandiose and overplayed and also gives White people an easy out - “Well this is not about me - I’m certainly not a savior.”
- These messages miss or obscure the key point - which is that as White people we need to bring as much capability to the challenge as possible and bring it with humility

It’s About Power AND Humility

“I am a powerful, capable, and humble ally. I bring qualities, experience, knowledge, and skills. AND this is a new domain for me, and I have great deal to learn about myself, about racism, and about the experience of Black people in America. ”

Can I say that? We can’t diminish ourselves (the “aw shucks” phenomenon) if we are to be effective allies. But we do need to approach the challenge of countering racism and being an effective ally with humility.

“Humility is not weakness, but strength under control.”

A R Bernard

It's About Following AND Leading

We do need to know our place, but our place is not an either/or issue, nor is it a static one. “Leader” and “follower” are roles, not people. There will be times when we need to be effective followers and times when we will need to be effective leaders.

I can be an effective ally when I am following, and I can be an effective ally when I am following.

- I need to know when to step back, support, be an understudy. I can bring my capabilities and experience to bear in a follower role, a role where a large part of my job is to support those in leadership roles.
- I need to know when to step up and take the lead. I can be powerful in a leadership role – and still be humble, open, aware of my gaps, and aware of the capabilities of others.

III.

Elements in a Profile of an Effective Ally

So, what can I do to be an effective ally in countering racism? This site focuses on action – on getting off the sidelines. There is no formula for being an effective ally because people and situations vary too much. However, there are a number of qualities, characteristics, and behaviors to be seriously considered and adapted.

We can create a desired profile of ourselves as an effective advocate based on our current reality – written down is good. And then we can continue to enrich it with experience. Such a profile requires us to initially acknowledge the qualities and characteristics we bring as an ally and can provide challenge and guidance as well as a good basis for being accountable. And we can add qualities and characteristics as they are uncovered or developed as we act.

Basics

1. I take on the struggle as my own and don't expect credit for being an ally.
2. I am clear on why I am committing to be an ally.

3. I am clear on the characteristics, qualities, knowledge, skills, and experience that I bring to the roles that might be asked of me, but don't broadcast them as qualifications for being an ally.
4. I "show up", focus on action, and put myself on the line.
5. I expect to make some mistakes but do not use that as an excuse for inaction.
6. When I make mistakes I take responsibility, hold myself accountable, and act differently moving forward.
7. I understand that emotional safety is not a realistic expectation if I take my alliance seriously. I will be outside my comfort zone.
8. I focus on my impact, not my intention.
9. I know that I will need to draw upon my courage, my ability to persevere and my resilience to support and sustain my actions.

"The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high, and we miss it, but that it is too low, and we reach it."

Michelangelo

Focusing on Others

10. I amplify the voice of the people I am supporting, knowing they can raise themselves up.
11. I listen more and talk less
12. I fill in supportive roles
13. I step out of the spotlight
14. I find out about others. I don't make assumptions. I listen to people without judgement or defensiveness.
15. I understand and appreciate the history of Black efforts to counter racism
16. I work continuously to develop an understanding of the personal and institutional experiences of the person or people with whom I am aligning myself.
17. I do research to learn more about the history of the struggle in which I am participating
18. I seek and build diverse community
19. I support the leadership of people of color. I do this consistently, but not uncritically.
20. I learn about the history of white people who have worked for racial justice.

"How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

Anne Frank

Being Conscious

21. I am self-aware – I self-reflect and respond to what I discover.
22. I am clear about why I am being an ally.
23. I work to check my unconscious or semi-conscious behaviors
24. I am aware of my implicit biases.
25. I am committed to the never-ending personal growth required to be genuinely supportive.
26. I explore my "dark side." I reflect on difficult questions like, "Do my politics and behavior perpetuate racism? Am I complicit in its persistence?"
27. I do the inner work to figure out a way to acknowledge how I participate in oppressive systems. I am conscious of White advantage.
28. I diversify my media consumption.
29. I am aware that as soon as you consider yourself not a part of the problem, you are.
30. I practice self-care to bring my best and persevere.

"One can have no smaller or greater mastery than mastery of oneself."

Leonardo da Vinci

Being Accountable - "How am I doing?"

31. I apologize without caveats.
32. I know that those on each side of an alliance are responsible for their own change and accept my responsibility.
33. I know that the people with privilege must initiate the change toward countering racism.
34. I avoid retreating into privilege when I'm tired, overwhelmed, or don't want to engage.
35. I am open to feedback and accept others' input as an opportunity to grow, become more effective and have a greater impact.

36. I do not expect others to teach me – I take responsibility for finding the resources to develop my awareness, understanding and competence.

“Accountability is the glue that bonds commitment to results.”

Will Craig

Engaging Others

37. I engage people who share my identity in being allies.

38. I think creatively about how to bring in more people of my identity.

39. I establish trusting relationships with those who can influence change.

40. I lean on other allies – I don’t do it alone.

“Be strong enough to stand alone, be yourself enough to stand apart, but be wise enough to stand together when the time comes.”

Anonymous

“My Top 10”

The Action Template that is part of this section provides a way to create your desired profile as an ally. The qualities and characteristics noted above are listed with room for you to:

- (a) identify the top 10 that are current strengths;
- (b) the 10 you would most like to develop; and
- (c) actions that you can take to bring your strengths to bear or develop new strengths.