

# Allyship: A Transformative Force for Equity and Inclusion in the Modern Organisation

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## **Allyship: From Becoming Aware of One's Privilege to Supporting Structural Change**

After the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the global challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, pervasive systemic inequalities in various organisational contexts have come into sharper focus (Arif et al., 2022). Recent political challenges have made it more difficult to make meaningful progress toward resolving such issues. The past few months have witnessed legislative and policy rollbacks, public debates about “wokeness” and challenges to DEI programs, collectively stalling and, worse, threatening to stall progress that have been made to fix these enduring problems. As the broader question around the relevance of DEI looms, this demonstrates why allyship is an essential driver for advancing equity and unlocking potential within organisations. Recent academic discussions evidence the essential role of allyship in actively promoting fairness and equity in the workplace, leading to increased productivity and happier workplaces (Feaster & McMichael, 2021).

What defines an ally? Is allyship a worthwhile pursuit to be an inclusive leader? Allyship is a dynamic concept that by design involves two groups: the marginalised and minority groups on one hand, and those in a relative position to drive meaningful change in organisational culture and practices. This chapter examines the relationships between these groups and explores the multifaceted nature of allyship from relational, cultural, and institutional perspectives. Ultimately, the aim is to reveal allyship's transformative potential and its capacity to catalyse change within the organisation. Whilst it may be tempting to dismiss allyship as just another fleeting initiative – especially as the importance of DEI is increasingly questioned – research and evidence consistently show that allyship is a central characteristic of inclusive leadership. Embracing allyship can unlock the full potential of diverse members within an organisation, driving innovation and long-term success.

## Allyship Defined

Allies, typically belonging to the dominant group, come with a unique vantage point: they have a firm grasp of traditional workplace norms, whilst having the ability to empathise with the viewpoints of outsiders, recognising how dominant behaviours perpetuate inequality. Whilst benefiting from such systems themselves, they ardently champion equity (Smith & Johnson, 2020). They engage proactively in identifying bias and inequality within organizations and redistributing the privilege they experience as cultural insiders to marginalised individuals (Arif et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2021).

The term 'ally' traces its origins to social activism and symbolises support for underrepresented and marginalised groups. Initially conceptualised to advance feminism and counter sexism, it has since expanded its scope to encompass various social causes like racial justice, LGBTQI+ rights, the rights of individuals with disabilities, and indigenous rights. Allies are not passive: their essence lies in undertaking concrete and transformative steps that generate real impact to marginalised groups (Carlson et al., 2020; Mokhtar & Chaudhry, 2022). Roxane Gay (2016), challenges the conventional understanding of allyship by debunking its typical definition:

*Black people do not need allies. We need people to stand up and take on the problems borne of oppression as their own, without remove or distance. We need people to do this even if they cannot fully understand what it's like to be oppressed for their race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, class, religion, or other marker of identity. We need people to use common sense to figure out how to participate in social justice.*

In this view, allyship is not about offering distant support, but in large part about embracing the struggles of others as one's own and engaging in the pursuit of equality and equity – even in the absence of lived experience. In contrast, the term 'performative allyship' describes instances where support from non-marginalised groups lacks tangible action, devolving into mere slogans and symbolic gestures, devoid of substantive commitment (Dobele et al., 2022).

Intersectionality is another central element. Within organisations, individuals frequently encounter multiple layers of marginalisation. Wilson et al. (2021) explains the different, sometimes intertwining, levels of marginalisation that a person may experience: sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, ageism, homophobia, and gender-based discrimination, among others. Critiquing the single-issue framework, Crenshaw (1989) in her theory of intersectionality, challenges the segregation of social and political identities, pointing out their interconnectedness in an individual's experience of marginalisation. Allies labour towards unravelling and addressing these diverse forms of oppression, advocating for an intersectional approach that aspires to create systemic changes across multiple levels (Mokhtar & Chaudhry, 2022).

As allies typically occupy a position of power and privilege, allyship serves as a foundational practice that enables leaders to create genuinely inclusive environments. Allyship can be seen as a necessary aspect of inclusive leadership, which has the goal of promoting of experiences of inclusion among followers. Inclusive leaders are ascertained not by the outcomes they produce, but by iterative, meta-cognitive process by which they engage they followers on varying levels: the individual, workgroup and organisational levels (Nishii & Leroy, 2022).

Whilst inclusive leadership is focused on process and action, allyship is equally concerned with action-direction process at each of its relational, cultural and institutional perspectives. It is clear, therefore, that the goals of allyship and inclusive leadership are overlapping. As Nishii and Leroy (2022) further examine, '[p]eople fully invest their cognitive, emotional and behavioural energy into their work when they experience the psychological meaningfulness, safety and availability needed to do so'. Allyship – which by design and by aspiration integrates

marginalised groups into the broader dominant groups – is easily the engine that can power inclusive leadership: it addresses the specific needs of diverse individuals and groups, fosters psychological safety, and ensures that inclusion is not just espoused but enacted throughout the organisation.

## Allyship Perspectives

Understand allyship in its entirety involves examining it from three distinct yet interconnected perspectives: relational, cultural and institutional. These lenses provide a comprehensive framework for utilising allyship as a catalyst for achieving equity and fairness for underrepresented groups.

Addressing the various issues behind the underrepresentation and marginalisation of disadvantaged in the workplace requires simultaneous efforts in varying levels. Wirz (2023) has proposed the Multi-Dimensional Model to address the problem of women self-deselecting from workforce and education, attributing the phenomenon to a number of interconnected factors.

According to Wirz (2014), the Multi-Dimensional Model comprises various levels: the Micro Dimension (personality and social traits), Meso Dimension (organisational power relations), Macro Dimension (socio-cultural) and Meta Dimension (global and regional). Just as the causes of gender gaps exist across these levels, so too can solutions emerge from concrete actions at each level or perspective. These dimensions closely reflect the perspectives and actions allies can take.

The Micro Dimension aligns with the relational perspective of allyship, focusing on individual attitudes, behaviours, and interpersonal relationships. At this level, allyship manifests through personal engagement, affirmation, and informed action—such as challenging bias in everyday interactions or providing direct support to marginalized colleagues. The Meso Dimension corresponds to the cultural organisational perspective, where allyship involves shaping group norms, organisational culture, and collective practices. Allies at this level work to foster inclusive environments, challenge discriminatory practices, and advocate for equitable policies within teams or departments. At the Macro and Meta Dimensions, allyship takes on an institutional and systemic character. Here, allies engage in efforts that address structural barriers, influence policy, and challenge societal or global norms that sustain disadvantage. This might involve advocating for legislative changes, supporting cross-sector coalitions, or participating in activism that seeks to transform the broader institutional and cultural landscape.

These perspectives are now discussed in detail below.

	Perspective		
	Relational	Organisational and Cultural	Institutional and Societal

<b>Meaning</b>	Building relationships, understanding one's privilege, advocating for underrepresented groups, and being a mentor or sponsor.	Challenging cultural stereotypes and biases that perpetuate inequality	Systemic change, advocating for policies, and enforcing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives
<b>Challenges Addressed</b>	Need for personal connections and support for underrepresented individuals, creating a sense of trust and belonging	Biases and discrimination ingrained in organizational culture and societal systems	Systemic issues such as biased hiring processes, unequal work allocation, and differentiated pay
<b>Proposed Solution</b>	Fostering meaningful relationships, advocating on behalf of underrepresented groups, and challenging biases and stereotypes	Fostering a workplace culture that allows everyone to thrive, acknowledging caregiving responsibilities, creating safe spaces for discussions about diversity, and celebrating the achievements of underrepresented groups	Institutionalizing allyship training, data collection to diagnose inequities, setting expectations for change, and celebrating wins to sustain momentum
<b>Problems from Implementation</b>	Excessive praise and pedestal effects may lead to perceived insincerity or tokenism	Resistance and backlash from individuals who feel their self-esteem or competence is challenged. Initiatives may become ceremonial without real impact	May lead to backlash if not genuinely passionate, and symbolic compliance may occur without substantive changes
<b>Benefits</b>	Promotes trust, inclusivity, and a sense of belonging. Allies help confront bias and support the advancement of marginalized groups	Promotes a more inclusive and equitable culture, encouraging the recognition of the contributions of	Helps address unconscious biases, promote accountability and lead to more effective

		underrepresented groups	diversity-related actions
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## Relational Allyship: Building Bridges and Advocating for Change

In allyship, a crucial aspect revolves around the relationships that form between allies and the marginalised groups they aim to support. At its core, allyship secures for others the privileges and benefits that would-be allies themselves enjoy, starting with a recognition of one's own privilege and transcending any associated feelings of guilt or shame (Arif et al., 2022).

To examine allyship from a relational perspective is to understand its social and relational aspects. At a base level, this means advocating for, speaking positively on behalf of, and actively supporting underrepresented groups within an organisation (Melaku et al., 2020). Allies leverage their inherent privilege as members of a dominant group to champion the cause of underrepresented individuals. In doing so, they wear multiple hats. As advocates, they use their lived experiences to lend voice and credibility to underrepresented groups. As mentors, they draw upon their prior experiences to guide others along their journey. Furthermore, they act as sponsors, maximising their connections to create tangible opportunities for their minority colleagues. Each of these role is indispensable for the advancement of members of the groups they are advocating for (Ayyala & Coley, 2022).

A key challenge in establishing meaningful relationships between dominant and non-dominant groups is the tendency towards social segregation. Often, individuals may not proactively engage with or seek to understand one another, particularly when they do not collaborate closely as a matter of business. This is where allies can advocate on behalf of underrepresented groups, drawing on their first-hand experiences. Applying the motivated cognition theory, Joshi et al. (2022) highlight that becoming an ally is not an inherent or automatic process; individuals may resort to stereotypes due to a lack of engagement. In certain scenarios, like the lack of senior female leaders, proximity of allies to these leaders significantly influences perceptions. Colleagues who work closely with minority individuals tend to have better access to information and are more invested in accurately assessing competencies. They are best positioned to be allies. On the other hand, those with low proximity to minority colleagues, who do not interact directly, may lean towards negative stereotypes when evaluating a female leader. Allies play a vital role by supplying low-proximity stakeholders with first-hand information about underrepresented groups, ultimately converting them into allies as well (Levine et al., 2022).

However, focusing solely on praising minority colleagues may fall short. To create lasting connections, organisations must facilitate interactions that allow individuals to see, hear and acknowledge their minority colleagues. To truly forge meaningful connections, organisations can implement certain strategies such as changing office layouts or workspaces, encouraging reshuffling to foster encounters with unfamiliar colleagues, and promoting broader experiences, therefore fostering allyship (Levine et al., 2022).

True allyship extends beyond understanding the experiences of marginalised individuals; it also requires active engagement in conversations about equity. Smith and Johnson (2020) stress that genuine allies know when to speak up, listen, ask questions, or step back when needed. They encourage peers within their dominant group to join them on the path toward equity. Whilst the subsequent steps in the allyship journey involve integrating diversity initiatives into organisation's core operations and holding leaders accountable, establishing a solid foundation is crucial. This foundation includes initiating conversations about apparent inequality, challenging biased language, and taking concrete actions to place marginalized and underrepresented groups on an equal footing with the cultural majority. Allies play an integral role in these efforts, as their impartiality often holds a distinct advantage (Smith & Johnson, 2020).

However, one needs to engage in reflective self-awareness to avoid the so-called “pedestal effects: - where the work of allies cultivate praise, resulting in personal benefits to them. Central privileged members can inadvertently perpetuate systemic inequality and create the illusion of addressing the issue (Carlson et al., 2020; Mokhtar & Chaudhry, 2022). For sure, allies may benefit by way of improved mental health, fulfilling relationships, and enhanced leadership credibility. But these should remain secondary to the overarching goal of allyship: organisational equality. Engaging in allyship should not be for personal gratification or a quest of personal virtue. Regardless of the recognition, attention or positive emotions it may bring, true allyship is *never* about the individual ally, and should not aim to enhance one's own image or well-being (Smith & Johnson, 2020).

### Organisational and Cultural: Challenging Biases in Organisational Culture

The second perspective is about allies working within and transforming the organisational culture, as part of efforts within the Meso Dimension of the Multi-Dimensional Model. Institutionalised bias and discrimination within organisations often manifest as cultural issues. Inequality is not always visible but is deeply rooted within an organisation's culture. For example, stereotypes persist, such as the belief that women are less ambitious than men, even when women and men have been shown time and again to perform at equal levels (Wilson et al., 2021). Gender roles are another cultural stereotypes; men are often associated with assertiveness and ambition, whilst women are linked to caregiving (Eagly et al., 2020). These stereotypes have detrimental consequences, contributing to disparities like the significant pay gap between men and women, with men earning 14 times more for similar work performance (Joshi et al., 2022).

In certain professions, like engineering, a legacy culture stemming from a less diverse past places unwarranted expectations on newcomers to conform to specific traits to succeed. Women, who represent only 17.5% of the engineering industry in Canada over the national average of 47.5% in the total workforce, are particularly affected. Traits typically associated with masculinity, such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and toughness, are viewed as indicators of effective leadership. Paradoxically, when women exhibit these traits, they are perceived as selfish, hostile, and devious. Female engineers report having to engage in uninteresting

conversations, endure offensive jokes while feigning amusement, and adopt more dominant communication styles to fit in. (Wilson et al., 2021). These cultural challenges reflect the hurdles that underrepresented groups face within organizations or industries. Allyship, therefore, assumes a crucial role in effecting systemic and behavioural changes to move toward equal representation in culturally unbalanced settings.

Avoiding the phenomenon of cultural taxation is a priority in promoting allyship, particularly within industries where minority groups are significantly underrepresented. Cultural taxation refers to the additional, often unrewarded work that marginalized faculty members undertake to represent ethnic diversity within organisations, such as serving on diversity committees for extended periods. This prevents them from pursuing roles that could more directly contribute to their professional advancement (Arif et al., 2022). Allies can help alleviate the burden on marginalised members by advocating for the sharing of Responsibilities and changes in policies that perpetuate cultural taxation.

Promoting allyship, especially in industries with substantial underrepresentation, necessitates making the contributions of underrepresented groups visible and actively working to normalise diversity. Initiatives like International Pride in STEM Day and #BLACKandSTEM offer valuable opportunities to celebrate and acknowledge the contributions of underrepresented groups. Another example would be the celebration of Ada Lovelace Day, which allows global celebration of the accomplishments of women in the scientific field. Creating safe spaces for discussions about diversity should be a deliberate goal in improving an organisation's culture. This is a prime opportunity for leaders to embrace the role of being allies by sending a clear message that diversity is valued by openly discussing them (Coe et al., 2019).

In addition to initiatives celebrating underrepresented groups, affinity groups also demonstrate the value the organisation places on allyship by creating a space for dialogue, education and action. These groups are typically established within institutions, such as medical schools and business organisations, to foster a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture. The Wake Forest School of Medicine has established initiatives such as the Black/African American and Allies and the White Allies for Human Equity. These platforms offer a space for individuals with shared common identities or interests to come together, provide mutual support, and collaborate effectively. Importantly, these groups are inclusive, often welcoming allies who actively support and advocate for those they serve (Feaster & McMichael, 2021).

Worse than cultural taxation, the current political climate highlights how efforts to transform organisational culture through DEI initiatives are facing significant pushback, particularly in the United States. Recent federal directives have ordered educational institutions to eliminate DEI programs or risk losing federal funding, creating widespread confusion and uncertainty as schools and universities scramble to comply (Binkley, 2025). This sweeping mandate extends beyond admissions to include hiring, financial aid, and even campus activities, with the explicit aim of ending what is described as 'racial preferences' in any form. The chilling effect of such policies is not limited to education: it signals a broader societal resistance to cultural change and threatens to undermine progress toward greater inclusion and equity in organizational settings.

The backlash against DEI initiatives demonstrates how deeply entrenched cultural biases can be protected by institutional power, making the work of allies even more critical. As organisations face external pressures to roll back diversity efforts, allies must advocate for the preservation and normalisation of inclusive practices so that they transcend the perceived bias that is associated with such efforts being DEI activities, ensuring that the contributions and needs of underrepresented groups remain visible and valued. Without such advocacy, there is a risk that organisational cultures will regress, reinforcing the very inequities that allyship seeks to dismantle (Vilcarino, 2025).

After all, these DEI programs that allies can and must advocate for have been proven to promote psychological safety within diverse teams, which are in turn closely tied to the broader organisational culture, setting expectations for how individuals interact and collaborate. People who are part of the cultural majority share norms, habits and assumptions that can prevent diverse teams from realising their full potential, instead leading to misunderstanding and frustration. Allies can play a vital role in fostering psychological safety within diverse teams by promoting understanding, inclusivity and open communication. They can help bridge the gap among team members with diverse backgrounds, ensuring that everyone feel valued and heard. Allies can actively work to create an environment where diverse team members can express their perspectives without fear of misunderstanding or exclusion. Ultimately, such efforts can help diverse teams achieve breakthrough performance and directly contribute to organisational goals (Bresman & Edmondson, 2022).

The endeavour to challenge culturally ingrained biases and stereotypes is far from straightforward, particularly in settings where individuals prioritise objectivity, social consciousness, and a meritocratic system – even if it is an illusion. In such environments, there can be resistance when individuals are asked to reconsider their objective worldviews or confront and address their own biases. Persistent beliefs about gender differences in mathematical and scientific abilities may continue to prevail. And so allies are indispensable in supporting marginalised individuals in confronting these biases (Coe et al., 2019).

### Institutional and Societal: Systemic Transformation for Equity

Moving beyond relationship-building (Micro Dimension) and fostering psychological safety in organisations (Meso Dimension), it is essential to move beyond the efforts of these allies and organisational leaders, so that pervasive issues can be addressed. The systems themselves require transformation, socio-culturally (Macro Dimension) and regionally/globally (Meta Dimension). Allyship is instrumental in driving systems-focused change. A holistic perspective of allyship must go beyond the relational perspective and aspire towards institutionalising them at a macro or meta level.

Institutional constraints present significant barriers that proactive allyship can help overcome. These constraints encompass issues such as gendered hiring processes, unequal work



allocation, differentiated pay – collectively coined as ‘death by a thousand cuts’ by female marketing academics (Dobele et al., 2022).

Many DEI initiatives face challenges and may not yield desired outcomes, mostly because of resistance in various levels of an organisation, from line-level employees to professionals, leaving hidden biases unaddressed. As a result, efforts of allies may at best only be partially effective. A more effective and holistic solution would be to shift from singling out specific groups or individuals to drawing attention to the need for change within an organisation’s processes, policies or normalised practices (Zheng, 2022). Allyship in this context involves supporting and championing the shift towards systemic change. Studies have shown that having DEI initiatives, institutionalising them in policies, and then enforcing them can more effectively address unconscious biases and instil accountability. These institutionalised and properly enforced policies serve as a powerful tool for allies to encourage their employer to remain committed to their DEI goals. In a South African company, allies used DEI policies to hold their employer accountable and demand evidence-based action to fulfil their diversity commitment (Jackson, 2023).

The need for institutional programs becomes evident when considering the challenges and penalties faced by women and non-white executives who advocate for their own groups within their organizations. These individuals may face penalties and reinforce the "glass ceiling," primarily due to institutional practices and policies that affect how diversity-valuing behaviour is perceived and rewarded within the organization (Johnson & Hekman, 2016). To mitigate the potentially negative effects of relational and cultural efforts in promoting organizational equity, institutionalized programs can exert a positive impact on the organizational structure and dynamics, resulting in more effective outcomes from diversity-related actions.

Institutional programmes (whilst conscious of the federal government pushback against such efforts) like the Advocates and Allies for Equity initiated by the North Dakota State University and subsequently adopted by various US-based educational institutions such as the Ohio State University, Colorado State University, Marquette University, and University of North Texas aim to promote gender equality by educating and equipping faculty members who are mostly men, with knowledge, skills, and strategies to effect organisational change within educational institutions (George, 2021). Incorporating allyship talks and trainings in institutionalised programmes can enhance allies’ core competencies in both theory and practice (Coe et al., 2019).

It is also important to address structural barriers that perpetuate bias by redesigning systems and processes. This can include adopting behavioural design approaches such as structured interviews with uniform questions and real-time scoring to minimize instinctive biases. Furthermore, promotions and performance appraisals should rely on objectively measured data rather than subjective judgements (Smith & Johnson, 2020). Gender and cross-cultural variations can influence self-ratings, highlighting the need for a more objective and data-driven approach to evaluations (Morse, 2016).

To be clear, institutional efforts at allyship do not guarantee organisational equity: they may inadvertently diminish allyship if framed in a manner that challenges a person's inherent goodness or if they lead to "symbolic compliance" without substantive changes. As Zheng (2022) explains, backlash is common in response to organisational equity efforts such as mandatory DEI trainings, affirmative action policies, as individuals may perceive these efforts as threats to their self-esteem, competence, and inherent "goodness". Any challenge to their language or interactions being biased, or suggestions that diversity, rather than skill, played a role in their hiring, can trigger resistance. If organisations do not genuinely prioritise implementing these policies, there is a risk that equal opportunity programs and initiatives will become merely ceremonial devoid of any real impact, exposing the true intentions of the organisations that adopted them in the first place (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017).

## The Five Essential Roles of an Ally

Drawing from the three core perspectives of allyship—relational, cultural, and institutional—five essential roles stand out as practical ways allies can make a difference. Each role connects directly to how allies support individuals, shape organisational culture, and influence broader systems. By stepping into these roles, they can help foster a workplace where equity and inclusion are not just goals, but everyday practices.

Internalising and stepping into these roles means taking concrete actions: offering genuine support to colleagues, challenging cultural norms that exclude, and advocating for fair policies and practices. Whether an ally is working one-on-one, leading a team, or influencing organisational change, these roles offer a clear roadmap for making allyship real and impactful. Together, they empower the ally to turn good intentions into meaningful progress within the complex landscape of organisational culture and equity.

### Learner: Empowering Allyship through Self-Education and Understanding

The first and foundational role of an ally is that of a learner. This role underscores the importance of self-education and a continual quest to understanding systemic organisational inequalities. It emphasises the importance of allies actively seeking learning opportunities while relieving marginalised groups of the undue burden of explaining and reliving their enduring inequalities (Ayyala & Coley, 2022; Wilson et al., 2021). Indeed, constantly posing questions to minority members about their plight may be well-meaning, but ultimately emotionally and mentally taxing, so part of allyship is to share in that burden by reading, listening and understanding (Smith & Johnson, 2020).

To build trusting relationships with minority groups, allies need to take responsibility for their education, starting by carving out the time to deliberately engage in the learning process, such as for example by taking a Women's Studies class (Carlson et al., 2020). From an institutional standpoint, the organisation may also offer workshops or online courses across all members of

the organisation to provide at least a common understanding of organisational equality (Wilson et al., 2021).

### Listener: Cultivating Empathy and Understanding through Active Listening

The role of a listener is the natural follow-up to being a learner, characterised by the desire to actively listen to the experiences of the marginalised groups in the organisation, understanding the systemic injustices they face, and exploring the collective solutions to address these disparities. Allies establish and nurture relationships with those they aim to support, seeking to gain a profound understanding of their experiences and challenges (Wilson et al., 2021). In practice, allies should approach this role with humility and seek permission (Melaku et al., 2020). Smith and Johnson (2020), in the context of men supporting female colleagues, put it quite simply when they propose asking the simple question: “What is one thing I can do to better support you?”

Through the learner and listener roles, allies embark on a self-reflective journey recognising their own social privilege and utilising this newfound awareness to cultivate humility by genuinely asking themselves the question: “Am I a part of the dominant group, and what benefits have I gained from it?” A person that has gone through an organisation free of the fear of being judged or treated differently because of their age, race, disability, gender, religion, sex or sexual orientation is likely a part of the dominant group and to be benefiting from a certain level of social privilege (Thorne, 2022). Coming into this realisation may come with some discomfort, but it is an important step towards self-awareness (Wilson et al., 2021).

The goal of being a learner and listener is to provide allies with an honest moment for self-reflection and self-acknowledgement of the inherent advantages and resources they may not realise they had all along, as well as an opportunity to cultivate humility (Ayyala & Coley, 2022). For Carlson et al. (2020), this ‘accountable self-reflection’ exercise is necessary for allies to be able to position themselves within the community’s efforts towards accountability and social justice, and a precursor to the actual change efforts they are expected to make.

### Challenger: The Critical Role of Confronting Bias

The role of a challenger represents a significant step in the allyship journey, where the ally confronts and challenges the pervasive inequalities deeply ingrained in organisational cultures and societal systems (Arif et al., 2022). In the scientific and medical fields, unfounded arguments, often presented as scientifically grounded, are used to justify the underrepresentation of women. Engaged leaders who challenge these long-standing beliefs around gender and merit are indispensable – and is a particularly important task that male leaders or those with power, privilege and social capital must do as allies in order to change the cultural tone in the organisation (Coe et al., 2019).

In essence, in performing this role, allies must actively challenge systemic biases and misconceptions, adapt their support to fit the unique needs of marginalised groups, and courageously confront deeply entrenched beliefs that perpetuate inequality (Wilson et al., 2021). Smith and Johnson (Smith & Johnson, 2020) discuss how many men outwardly express support for gender equality but remain passive when it comes taking public action that may risk their social standing.

Being a challenger means bringing disparities in the workplace into the surface, standing up for female colleagues, and actively challenging any behaviour or comments disparaging to them. They must be prepared to confront such behavior decisively, regardless of whether marginalized individuals are present in the room or not. The ally's role is to challenge and address discriminatory comments and actions, while also countering gaslighting tactics that invalidate the experiences of the victims (Melaku et al., 2020). To be sure, this is not easy and involves an awareness of the cultural biases that may be systemic in an organisation.

### Advocate: Supporting and Promoting the Advancement of Underrepresented Talent

Beyond addressing bias, discrimination and inequality, the advocate role focuses on actively promoting the advancement of underrepresented and underprivileged groups within the organisations. For Smith and Johnson (2020), this means committing to creating visibility for women, ensuring equitable access to opportunities, and advocating for their promotions – especially at critical career junctures. The same goes for the rest of minority groups coming from different racial and cultural backgrounds: leaders who are allies must actively seek them out and serve as vocal advocates of these talents, even if it means putting some of their social capital on the line (Melaku et al., 2020).

Furthermore, being an ally is about actively working to eliminate barriers that hinder the success and advancement of underrepresented groups. This includes fostering a workplace culture that allows everyone to thrive, acknowledging their disproportionate caregiving responsibilities (in the case of women), and creating flexible work options that at the same time maximise the value of the business (Smith & Johnson, 2020).

### Educator: Promoting Awareness, Understanding and Systemic Change

The final role of an ally, that of an educator, recognises the importance of allyship training and integrating these efforts into organisational change efforts (Coe et al., 2019) Allyship training seeks to raise awareness about power and privilege dynamics in the workplace and emphasizes the roles and responsibilities of all community members in supporting and advocating for one another.

To implement effective allyship in the workplace, Zheng (2022) provides a practical framework. Effective allyship goes beyond challenging biases; it entails educating others about the importance of addressing inequity and promoting inclusivity as part of broader institutional

change. By collecting data to diagnose inequities, setting clear expectations for change, and celebrating progress, allies work to drive a cultural shift within the organization. These steps align with the ally's role as an educator in promoting awareness and understanding of equity and inclusion. More than challenging biases, they educate others about the importance of addressing inequity and promoting inclusivity in a manner that can be done best – not by one-off training activities but as part of a broader institutional change that can cause a cultural shift in the organisation (Wilson et al., 2021).

In sum, the five roles of an ally – learner, listener, challenger, advocate, and educator – collectively provide a comprehensive framework for fostering genuine support, inclusivity, and fairness within organizations. By embracing these roles, allies contribute to meaningful change that extends beyond individual growth, creating a more equitable and just environment for all.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, allyship is both a theoretical framework and a practical approach that plays a vital role in addressing systemic inequalities and fostering a more inclusive and fair environment. However, its true meaning lies not merely in intent, but in concrete actions and sustained advocacy for marginalised groups – grounded in a genuine understanding of their experiences and challenges. To be a true ally means listening and actively engaging in conversations about equity, knowing when to speak up, and challenging systemic biases.

From a relational perspective, the goal of allyship is not about personal gratification, but the cultivation of authentic connections and advancement of organisational equality without compromising (and in fact directly contributing to) the overall goals. Culturally within an organisation, allyship is essential in confronting stereotypes and biases embedded in organisational norms. Initiatives that celebrate the contributions of underrepresented groups, along with affinity spaces that foster dialogue and education, are key strategies (Feaster & McMichael, 2021). In the midst of government pushback against such efforts, allies and organisations must navigate a way to see that they exist in some shape or form. Furthermore, allyship can help alleviate the burden of cultural taxation often placed on marginalised groups by advocating for policy changes (Arif et al., 2022). In fact, had most of these organisational strategies been advocated for at a policy or legislative level, the rollback by the government of these initiatives may not have succeeded in some parts. At the institutional level, allyship is crucial for bringing systemic change. This involves advocating for and enforcing diversity, equality and inclusion policies and initiatives within organisations, with programs such as Advocates and Allies for Equity equipping allies with the knowledge and skills needed for change (George, 2021).

To fully realise the potential of allyship, allies should step into the five distinct roles: Learner, Listener, Challenger, Advocate and Educator. Effective allies continuously educate themselves, listen to and amplify the voices of marginalized groups, challenge systemic inequities, advocate for underrepresented talents, and educate others about equity and inclusion (Ayyala & Coley, 2022; Coe et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2021). These roles are essential for creating a more

equitable and inclusive environment and can lead to meaningful change at the relational, cultural and institutional levels. In a world where systemic inequalities persist, allyship stands as a transformative force capable of dismantling barriers and creating a more just and equitable future. It is not just a concept, but a call to action, a commitment to change, and a promise to stand together in the pursuit of fairness and inclusivity.

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