

Allyship at Work

How to be a better ally



“

**If we know,
then we must
fight for your life
as though it were
our own—which
it is—and render
impassable with
our bodies the
corridors to the
gas chamber.
For if they come
for you in the
morning, they
will be coming
for us that night.”**

*James Baldwin, An Open Letter
to my Sister, Miss Angela Davis*



What is allyship?

Allyship is a process of building relationships with people who are marginalised and standing in solidarity with them. Allyship takes work. It requires active efforts to create trust, be consistent, and be accountable.

Think about the traditional definition of an ally—an alliance between two or more countries. If one ally is attacked, the other spends its resources to defend their ally.

Ally is a powerful term. It means standing shoulder to shoulder with someone else. Not just showing support from the side lines, but taking an active stance and using power, privilege and voice to stand in solidarity with someone else who does not have power, privilege or a voice.

People can be marginalised for many different reasons. This is often because they have a particular characteristic and are oppressed because of it. Racism, homophobia, transphobia, religious hatred, sexism, misogyny, ageism, ableism, are all forms of oppression which can marginalise someone.

Allies can also face their own oppression and marginalisation. But in that moment, the ally has the power, the privilege and the voice, and the marginalised person does not.

The Anti-Oppression Network defines allyship this way:



An active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person in a position of privilege and power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalised group.



What does being an ally look like?

A Black female college lecturer overhears two students homophobicly abuse a white male student.

In this situation, the lecturer has the power, the privilege and the voice, and can be an ally to the student who is being targeted because of their sexual orientation.

The lecturer immediately shuts down the conversation and vocally warns the bullies she will not tolerate that language in class. The lecturer takes the time to speak to him afterwards and offers support. She demonstrates that she will advocate on the student's behalf if he experiences anything like that again.



In a workplace, a man witnesses his colleagues disparage and make fun of the idea of sharing pronouns in a work context. He doesn't know if anyone is offended by this. But he starts to share his own pronouns in email signatures and work profiles to normalise the concept. Other people soon follow his lead, with some people feeling more comfortable to share their own gender-neutral pronouns.

“ *When you get somebody outside of that group, who may be a role model to others, speaking about these things there's the opportunity for the message to have greater impact.”*

Professor Binna Kandola OBE - Pearn Kandola LLP



Anyone can be an ally

Everyone has multidimensional identities, and everyone experiences marginalisation and privilege at different times. A person without children might experience privilege at work over a person with children and childcare responsibilities. But the person without children can show allyship by showing flexibility for instance, or advocating for meetings to be held at more family-friendly hours.





Allies will make mistakes

Making mistakes is part of being an ally. Allyship has to be authentic, not performative. This means a person should be motivated by wanting to show solidarity with the marginalised person, and not for any other reason, such as 'looking the part.' This means action is a crucial component of allyship, because not doing anything sends a clear message that the behaviour is not deemed to be a problem. Because allyship is focused on action, sometimes allies will overstep, but this will help to show where the right line is.

Allyship is more effective when practised together

Allyship is especially powerful when multiple people engage in allyship behaviours together. Working in solidarity with others can be highly effective when challenging problematic institutional behaviours or people who are more senior. Having a culture of allyship in an organisation is instrumental in building a more inclusive working environment and leaders and managers have a key role to play in demonstrating and encouraging allyship behaviours.



“As allies, we can challenge in the moment, we can support somebody who is making a challenge in the moment.”

Louise Weston - Partner, Pearn Kandola LLP





Allies educate themselves

Allies take it upon themselves to be educated and understand other people's experiences. They don't expect someone else to teach them. Learning has to be active. It is not incumbent on a marginalised person to explain themselves to an ally. An ally will educate themselves, even if that means confronting their own biases, prejudices and privileges along the way. This could mean actively seeking out different sources of information, reading new books or opening oneself to different life experiences.

Building solidarity

Allyship has the potential to bring about real, consequential change. Showing up for someone else in their time of need is one of the most powerful things another person can do. If you show up for them, they will often show up for you.

Consider the earlier example with the lecturer and the student.



The lecturer stepped in for the student. She used her privilege and power as the lecturer, and her voice as someone with authority, to shut down the homophobic bullying and warn the perpetrators of serious consequences. Later on, the student overhears other students make racist remarks about the lecturer. He stands up for her. He tells them the language is wrong and offensive, and uses his power, privilege and voice as another student to challenge the racism and show up for the lecturer.

Allyship is not a top-down system where the privileged and powerful sweep in to save the marginalised. Allyship is built on a foundation of solidarity. One person showing up for another, who gains the confidence to show up for someone else, which starts to make things better for everyone.



“ *That individual, that ally, may not actually identify as being a part of that marginalised group, but they use their voice, their power and their privilege to stand in solidarity with them, to empower those individuals from the marginalised group to speak for themselves, to challenge issues, but also to create parity in experience.”*

Mabinty Esho - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Lead, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust



Allyship in action

Throughout the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, many groups across the world fought to raise awareness and spur governments to action. One of the most successful was the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), which was at the centre of working in solidarity with the African National Congress (ANC) and other groups trying to bring democracy and justice to South Africa throughout the 60s, 70s and 80s.



CYMRU-ACTSA (Action for Southern Africa - Wales)

Most AAM activists and members were not directly affected by the apartheid regime in South Africa, where white minority rule violently enforced a system of institutional racial segregation. However AAM took their lead from the coalition of South African organisations fighting against apartheid to encourage boycotts of South African products.

AAM campaigned against participation of the apartheid regime in the Olympics, in the Commonwealth, and encouraged the government to impose economic sanctions on the country. AAM encouraged public participation in the campaign to free Nelson Mandela from his 27 years in prison.

Throughout the struggle against apartheid, AAM and other international groups showed solidarity with the ANC and those fighting to overturn the unjust system in South Africa. They did so through public education and centering the experience of political prisoners like Nelson Mandela in a form of international allyship which eventually led to a democratic South Africa.



What is allyship?

Allies make mistakes, but the key thing is they try. They are not perfect, but will own mistakes while taking it upon themselves to learn and be better the next time.

Allyship overlaps with this notion of being an active bystander or an upstander. This is where being an inclusive ally becomes important because there are tools, techniques to enable to be heard about something concerning in an organisation.

Allyship is active and action-focused. An ally will see something wrong and do something about it, even if what they do is not always apparent in the moment. An ally is not a self-defined title. An ally should be recognised as such by the people who they seek to support. Allyship is not about speaking out and claiming the title of an ally. Allyship is about action and solidarity.

Here are some examples of acts of allyship.



Sponsoring

highlight the expertise you see in other people. Recommend others and vocally support their efforts.



Championing

actively advocate for more underrepresented groups in key positions. Willingly defer to marginalised colleagues to give them a voice.



Amplifying

repeat good ideas and credit their sources. Highlight the experiences and efforts of marginalised people within communications.



Advocating

make noise for underrepresented people to be included and have a voice. Make introductions between senior colleagues and marginalised people.



Educating

explore new sources of information; podcasts, books, articles, and share what you have learned with others. Do your own research instead of asking people to educate you.



Challenging

push back on offensive jokes and banter. Don't just refuse to participate but call it out and explain why it is inappropriate and wrong.



Distracting

take people out of uncomfortable situations or stop distressing activities by putting yourself in the middle.



Listening

act as a confidant for other people. Listen to their experiences and encourage them to share concerns and frustrations.

“ In the workplace, I think the most important thing an ally can do is listen. I think it’s really important that, as allies, people see that that’s what they are. They’re allies, they’re not talking about their own lived experience. And therefore, there are people who know more, who experience the prejudice and oppression on a daily basis, whose lived experience it is, and they need to be listened to.”

Gerry Robinson - Executive Headteacher, Haringey Learning Partnership



Communicating as an ally

Open The Front Door (OTFD) is a communication framework developed by SuperCamp Learning Forum in 2016. It can help challenge inappropriate behaviour in a non-confrontational way that supports constructive dialogue.

- **First, we share our Observations**
‘I’ve noticed in our weekly meetings that men in the team get more of a chance to be heard than women and their suggestions are taken more seriously.’
- **We then set out our Thoughts on what we’ve observed**
‘I don’t think it ultimately makes for very productive meetings or a very happy team.’
- **Next, we express our Feelings**
‘I’m very uncomfortable with this behaviour.’
- **And finally, we set out our Desire for what we d like to happen in the future**
‘I’d like us all to give everyone the chance to have their say in future and just recognise everyone’s contribution.’

This makes up OTFD - Observations, Thoughts, Feelings and Desire. Also known as Open The Front Door.

“ Social norms are incredibly powerful, so being a visible ally and exhibiting those behaviours will encourage other people to join you on your allyship journey.”

Ashley Williams - Pearn Kandola LLP



“ In order to be an ally, you need to understand more. You need to empathise more with other groups of people. A lot of work on inclusion is being able to see the world as somebody else sees it. It’s a very human ability that we have, and we can all do it. We need to practise it a bit more often.”

Professor Binna Kandola OBE - Pearn Kandola LLP



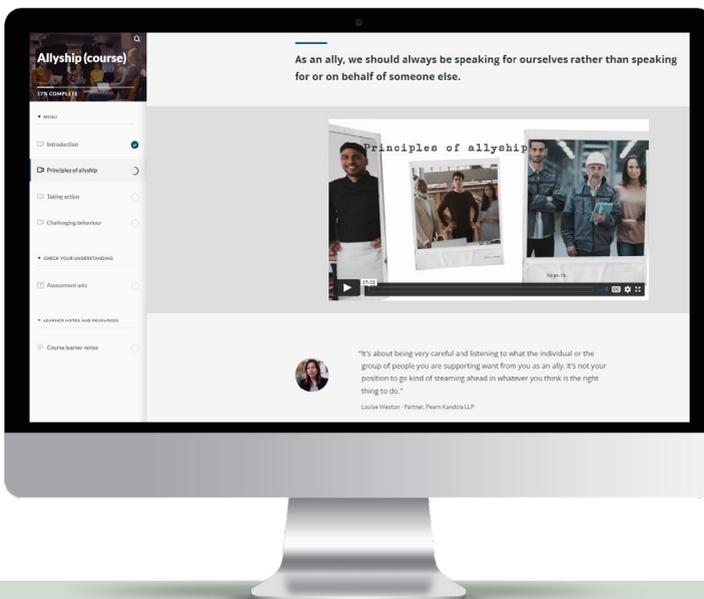
What to do next

Skill Boosters' new film-based course on allyship explains what it means to be an effective ally and shows how workplace allies can help tackle things like micro-aggressions, bullying, harassment and other inappropriate behaviour, and help to make the workplace more equitable and inclusive.

This course will give a better understanding of:

- The different minority and marginalised groups to whom we can be allies
- What it means to be an effective and inclusive ally
- The importance of awareness, empathy, action and authenticity when acting as an ally
- The different actions that allies can take to support people from minority or marginalised groups
- How to use the 'Open The Front Door' communication framework to challenge inappropriate behaviour
- The importance of taking on board feedback and learning from our mistakes when being an ally

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About VinciWorks

We are a creative and driven team working hard each day to reinvent the impact that compliance tools and training can make.

Too many businesses are using boring, tedious and cumbersome processes to train their staff and maintain compliance. We know you can do better, and to prove it, we have been developing the training, tools and resources to help any organisation of any size to change the status quo.

About Skill Boosters

Founded by Bryan De'Ath, an accomplished filmmaker with over 30 years of experience, Skill Boosters brings film and television production values to the world of e-learning. Its cinematic courses embed learners in relatable workplace situations with commentary from industry experts. The acquisition also allows VinciWorks to benefit from the expertise of Skill Boosters' Senior Account Director Peter Thorpe, who has over 20 years' experience in the Learning & Development industry.



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