

How to: challenge racism as active bystanders, allies and accomplices

We all want and need to challenge racism in our workplaces. We want to change the behaviours and the language, as well as the organisational systems and processes that restrict the opportunities of ethnic minority people.

This is vital work, but it can't be done without everyone playing their part. Anti-racism is everybody's responsibility; all of us have to take action.

So how do we go about it?

1. Understand the roles people can play in eradicating racism at work

To support a programme of anti-racism in your organisation, there are three broad roles people can adopt:

Active bystander: Someone who intervenes or challenges when they see discriminatory (meaning racist) language or behaviour. Active bystanders understand how their actions help to build an inclusive culture; they believe in doing the right thing.

Ally: Someone who will stand with an individual or group in a marginalised community, and use their privilege to amplify the marginalised voices. Examples include white people taking part in the BLM marches or actively championing anti-racism.

Accomplice: Someone who works to dismantle structures and systems that create or perpetuate racism, and whose work is informed by ethnic minority people. An example would be a person who works with ethnic minority colleagues to ensure that the

recruitment practices in their organisation are free from racial bias. Accomplices take a step beyond allyship, though the two terms are often used interchangeably.

2. Improve your own knowledge of racism in the workplace

- Get to understand everyone's responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 – to know who is protected, and from what. Be aware of how different types of discrimination can affect your organisation, the perpetrators and the victims.
- Seek out diverse opinions and experiences to broaden your understanding of anti-racism, particularly in a work context, and to benefit from a wider range of perspectives.
- Learn about the experiences of those who are different to you. You can do this through reading articles, blog posts and books (fiction or non-fiction), watching internet videos (YouTube etc) and TED talks, etc. Don't assume that ethnic minority friends and colleagues will teach you – the onus is not on them to resolve racism.
- Challenge your own internal biases and assumptions. Understand your blind spots and where they come from, and find ways to eliminate their influence on your thoughts and decisions.
- Be intentional: consider why you are doing something or saying something, and think it through carefully before you start.



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The truth is, genuine allyship is not kindness, it is not a charitable act, nor is it even a personal commitment to hold anti-racist ideals – it is a fall from grace.

Kelsey Smoot, in the Guardian

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3. Lay the groundwork in your organisation, especially among senior leadership

- Check that your HR policies are consistent with anti-racist principles, and that they support everyone against all forms of discrimination, including micro-aggressions and subtle acts of exclusion.
- Review your bullying and harassment, whistleblowing, etc. policies to ensure they are appropriate as well as transparent, and that they explain the procedure that follows each report.
- Think about your language, body language and behaviours and ensure you're demonstrating inclusion and anti-racism.
- Make sure that everyone is ready to hold each other to account. Remind yourselves to practice anti-racism and help each other to consider the negative impact of certain behaviours. Bear in mind that everyone makes mistakes. When that happens, apologise, correct yourself and move on. Remember that an apology means nothing if the behaviour continues.
- Ensure your leaders and executives embody these behaviours and lead by example – this will help your employees feel more confident that they, too, can do it.
- Be ready to support those who challenge racism when they see it; reassure active bystanders, allies and accomplices that you are with them.
- Think about how you will create a safe culture for everyone, including and especially those who come from ethnic minority backgrounds. Think about ways of creating an environment that's psychologically safe, that doesn't force

assimilation into the dominant culture, and that celebrates the diversity of everyone's contributions to your organisation.

4. Put your anti-racism programme into place

- Train your employees on anti-racism – including microaggressions and subtle acts of exclusion, bullying, harassment, victimisation, active bystanding and allyship. Work to improve their understanding of inclusion and anti-racism so that everyone knows exactly what your organisation stands for.
- Be clear about the behaviours you expect all employees to display, and that any discrimination will not be accepted. Deal seriously with all reports of racism, and avoid falling into the trap of maintaining someone's employment simply because they're a high performer.
- Encourage people to report instances of racism, and deal with them appropriately. Your case numbers will likely increase in the short term, but this will help you understand where your organisational culture is in terms of anti-racism and perhaps pinpoint specific issues.
- Encourage active bystanders, allies and accomplices. Explain to your employees what these behaviours look like in your organisation and let everyone know that they will be supported.
- Make everyone accountable for their behaviour. Let them know that there will be zero-tolerance for racist behaviour of any sort. This doesn't necessarily mean disciplinary procedures. People often don't understand the effect their language or behaviour has on others, but once they're made aware of it, they willingly change. But if there is resistance, you should not shy

away from a formal response. The rigour with which you respond gives confidence to those who experience racism that your organisation will not tolerate it.

How to be an active bystander, an ally or an accomplice at work

- Before you step in, check the situation – is it safe for you to challenge in the moment? Employers – you must work to give people the confidence that they will be safe if they challenge racism.
- Support the person to whom the racism was directed. If they want to share their experience, listen attentively. Should they decide to report the incident, your help or support could be useful. Or maybe you could point them towards other resources, such as HR, a staff network, the union rep or your employee-assistance programme.
- Use your body language to make it clear you don't approve of the behaviour – e.g. don't laugh or even force a polite smile when you hear a racist joke.
- Call out the behaviour – publicly if you can – and support the person to whom it was directed.
- Name or acknowledge the behaviour for what it is. For example, if someone repeatedly commits microaggressions or subtle acts of exclusion, discuss it with them; explain why it's unacceptable and be clear it needs to stop.
- If it's not possible to challenge the behaviour in the moment, change the subject. Move the conversation on, then follow up later with a direct conversation or a report.
- If you're in a group, more than one of you can challenge the behaviour. Sometimes it takes one person to call out the behaviour before others step in to provide support.

- Report the behaviour. Follow your organisation's policy for reporting incidents. It doesn't have to have been directed at you for you to report it.
- Finally, be kind to yourself. Standing up for what's right requires courage, and is rarely comfortable. Challenge in whatever way works for you – you don't always have to do it publicly or in a way that's confrontational.

Further information

- [Performative allyship is deadly \(here's what to do instead\) - Forbes](#)
- [Allyship and going beyond the hashtag - Joanne Lockwood](#)
- [A challenging conversation: how to tackle the status quo successfully - The Foundation Forum](#)
- [The bystander effect - Coolpsychologist](#)
- [Three ways to be a better ally in the workplace - Melinda Epler](#)
- [How to support witnesses of harassment and build healthier workplaces - Julia Shaw](#)
- [When and how to respond to microaggressions - Ella F. Washington, Alison Hall Birch, and Laura Morgan Roberts](#)
- [White people say they want to be an ally to Black people. But are they ready for sacrifice?- Kelsey Smoot](#)

This 'How to' guide is an extract from our [Anti-racism toolkit: Building an anti-racist culture](#). Find out how to get your copy and access the other 8 'How to' guides in this series.