

IN SOLIDARITY WITH: Allies as Agents of Social Change

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Overview & Rationale

This lesson gives participants an opportunity to learn about and discuss being an ally* to transgender people through a mini-lecture, small- and large-group activities and a self-assessment activity. Allies that develop empathy, awareness, and skills are more effective collaborators in social justice and social change work. This lesson works particularly well when paired with **Lesson 14: Check Your Privilege: Understanding and Building Awareness** on page 130 and **Lesson 12: A Thousand Cuts: Understanding Anti-Transgender Microaggressions** on page 119.

Audience

This lesson works particularly well with people who identify as allies or would like to expand their skills. This lesson works best with 10-30 participants, but can be modified for larger audiences.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Identify 2 of the 10 components of being an effective ally
- Identify 1 situation in which an inappropriate comment or question may occur, and explain why the comment or question would be problematic

Background Knowledge for Facilitators

It will be helpful for facilitators to understand a range of strategies that people can utilize to be better allies. It will also be very helpful to know personal narratives from allies that indicate why being an ally is important to them and narratives from transgender people that describe being positively affected by allies.

Time

- Preparation: 10 minutes
- Implementation: 90 minutes

*The word **"ally"** can be contentious. Some people identify with it and use it with conviction. Others view it more negatively and use "in solidarity with" instead. This is often based on the idea that "ally" is a problematic label because it takes focus away from the people being marginalized. There are also some who challenge the idea that someone can identify as an ally, or has the right to do so. We choose to use the word "ally" here because it remains the best word we can find to assign to people with privilege who stand in solidarity with marginalized people, in this case, transgender people. We realize language matters and changes, and we expect to learn new words to add to the conversation.

Materials

- *Ten Components of Being an Effective Ally* handout (1 per participant)
- *Ally Role Play* handout (1 per pair)

Preparation

- Make copies of the handouts
- Review the *Ally Role Play Activity: Facilitator's Guide* to ensure clarity of the situations and talking points

Procedure

1. Explain: We will be exploring what it means to be an ally to and advocate for transgender people. There are many components of being an ally and it is important to understand how to be the best possible ally.
2. Pass out copies of the *Ten Components of Being an Effective Ally* handout, and ask for volunteers to read one of the statements aloud.
3. Ask participants to find a peer they do not know particularly well and sit with that person to work on this activity together. Direct the pairs to pick out which of the 10 components stands out the most to them and discuss why they believe it is an important part of being an ally. After 10 minutes, ask all of the pairs to come back to the large group, and ask for 3-5 volunteers to share which component they chose and why.
4. Once participants have shared their statements and rationales, conclude the activity by emphasizing the following talking points:
 - Because anti-transgender prejudice is so prevalent, there are ample opportunities to engage or advocate as an ally.
 - Ally work can take on a variety of approaches, styles and actions.
 - Ally work changes based on time, places, and situation.
 - There are situations in which allies have unique opportunities to act as advocates when transgender people do not have access to or are not welcome or safe in a venue or space.
5. Explain: Being an ally is more than declaring a lack of prejudice toward transgender people or having a desire to be supportive of transgender people. There are a variety of ways to approach being an ally, but one of the most important and prevalent opportunities available to potential allies is calling out instances of ignorance, bias or discrimination.
 - Explain that the following activity will involve a volunteer being presented with a brief scenario that addresses one of the ways in which transgender people are asked questions or talked about in ways that are inappropriate and require interruption, correction, and education. Distribute the *Ally Role Play* handouts to the participants.
 - For the first 2 scenarios, ask for 2 volunteers, and ask 1 volunteer to read the scenario with the problematic statement. Ask the large group to identify a few reasons why the statement is problematic. Then ask the other volunteer to read the possible responses aloud and explain which one they would select and why.
 - For the remaining 3 scenarios, ask people to return to their previous pairs. Direct participants that 1 person will read a statement that is ignorant, biased or prejudiced, and the other person in the pair will practice how they would respond. Allow 5 minutes for each of the scenarios, stopping to discuss the following questions briefly after each scenario:
 - Why was the statement problematic?
 - What was it like for you to try to respond to this statement? How easy or hard was it to do?
 - How did you respond? What were the statements you made?
 - How comfortable would you feel in responding this way in real life?

Talking Points

- Stress that the most effective strategy for calling someone out is to provide useful content in a warm and non-shaming tone. It is also helpful to provide context and clarity about why a statement is problematic, and offer a simple correction.
- Validate that it can be stressful, or that it can be hard, to find the words to call someone out at the exact moment that a hurtful remark occurs. It is often better to try to intervene in that moment because it helps raise awareness and communicates solidarity with and support of transgender people.
- There are situations in which an intervention may be more effective when done privately or at a later time. (For example, if you are addressing your supervisor, or if you are concerned about a defensive response). When it is not possible or advantageous to call someone out at a particular moment, it may be possible to re-approach the person later in a more private location.

Concluding Discussion Questions

After the group has completed all 5 scenarios, lead the whole group in a culminating discussion using the following questions:

- Why is it important that allies intervene in situations in which there is bias or prejudice?
- Where do you think that you might encounter some of these situations?
- How likely do you think it is that you would speak up in an instance in which someone makes a statement that is ignorant, biased, or prejudiced?
- What additional steps could you take to become more confident as an ally or advocate in such situations?

Evaluation Questions

- ✓ There are 10 components of being an effective ally. Name 2.
- ✓ What are 2 situations in which an inappropriate comment such as “What was your name before?” might occur, and why would this be a problematic comment?

For groups larger than 30 or if there are time constraints, assign each pair a scenario rather than having each pair do all scenarios. This will shorten the time required to process the role-play

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Role-play activities often raise participants' anxiety. Validate that these practices can be stressful but are an essential part of acquiring the skill of successfully advocating for transgender people and communities.

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Participants may exhibit frustration or resist the topics being presented, particularly if they have a hard time

acknowledging that their actions may contribute to causing harm—even when it is not intended. It is important to stress the difference between impact and intent, and help participants see that their actions can have significant ramifications even when not intended.

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Ally work is hard and can be thankless. Allies often receive conflicting messages about their role in advocating for and supporting transgender people—including whether or not it is even okay to call themselves an ally. Transgender communities will include multiple perspectives on this question. In the end, it

TIPS FOR FACILITATORS

is more important that allies advocate for transgender people than worry about what they call themselves. As a facilitator, if participants raise these concerns, it will be helpful to validate that it can be difficult to navigate and redirect them back to their initial goal of wanting to be an ally. Allies do play an essential role in creating social change.

Ally Role Play Activity:

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

ROLE PLAY 1

You're having a conversation with a co-worker. The co-worker is referring to a staff member who is an out transgender man named Mohammad, and says "Oh, you know her, when she started working here she worked in facilities, now she's the one you need to talk to in the IT department to get your new email login."

Why this is problematic:

- The co-worker used the wrong pronoun.
- This is a common microaggression against transgender people.

Suggested Responses:

- "Hey, just so you know, Mohammad uses male pronouns."
- "I get that it can feel confusing to talk about Mohammad's past work, before he transitioned, but it's really important that we all use his name, Mohammad, and male pronouns when we talk about him in the past, present, or future."
- "If you actually need to talk about other work Mohammad has done here, you can just say, 'Mohammad used to work in facilities.'"

ROLE PLAY 2

You're talking in a group that includes a gender non-conforming person, Terrill. A friend turns to this individual and with compassion and heartfelt emotions exclaims "Oh my gosh, you're so brave being who you are like that!"

Why this is problematic:

- Even though the person's intentions may be positive and affirming, the statements call attention to Terrill's gender expression in a way that may be embarrassing or demeaning.
- Telling Terrill that they are brave implies that their gender expression is a choice or decision.
- This can be perceived as patronizing.
- This is a common microaggression against transgender people.

Suggested Responses:

- "I think it's less about Terrill being brave and more about working to get the rest of the world to discriminate and stigmatize transgender people less."
- "Yes, I think there are unique challenges and discrimination that transgender and gender non-conforming people face, but calling it 'brave' might be seen as unintentionally patronizing."
- "Sometimes when 'bravery' is used it sets transgender people apart or 'others' them. It further stigmatizes transgender or gender non-conforming people."

ROLE PLAY 3

You're talking with a small group of friends that includes an out transgender woman, Sylvia. She is sharing a story of frustration and stress caused by rejection and lack of understanding of her family of origin. One friend chimes in and says, "Oh don't worry, they'll come around someday, you're so great."

Why this is problematic:

- While this may be well intentioned, this can be perceived as dismissive, minimizing or invalidating.
- The transgender woman may have been looking for support, and may feel further rejected or misunderstood.
- This implies that the transgender woman's impression of her family is inaccurate, and denies the reality that many people are rejected by their families.
- This is a common microaggression against transgender people.

Suggested Responses:

To the friend and transgender woman:

- "I'm sure she knows her family best."
- "Families can be really complicated; I don't think it's right for us to try to oversimplify a really personal issue like this."

To the transgender woman:

- "I can't speak for your family, but we're here if you need support."
- "I'm sorry they're creating difficulties for you."

ROLE PLAY 4

A co-worker asks to talk with you privately. She says she knows that you are close with an out transgender co-worker, Marsha, and she was curious about whether you know if Marsha had had "the surgery" yet.

Why this is problematic:

- Asking about a person's surgical status is invasive, inappropriate and rude.
- Decisions about whether to disclose private medical information should be Marsha's.
- Asking a co-worker behind Marsha's back is gossip and inconsiderate.

Suggested Responses:

- "Marsha's medical history is private, just like the medical history of the rest of our co-workers."
- "That's really private information."
- "Regardless of what operations Marsha may or may not have had, she has the right to have her privacy respected. Especially privacy about her personal medical history, that's not at all a workplace discussion."
- "I don't think Marsha feels comfortable sharing that information with people, and it doesn't affect your ability to do your job effectively."

ROLE PLAY 5

In the course of a small meeting, Yasmin mentions that she is a transgender woman. Another person in the meeting turns and says, "I never would have known, you look so much like a real woman!"

Why is this problematic?

- This implies that Yasmin is not a "real" woman, and that she is really a man.
- While potentially intended as affirming, the statement undermines Yasmin's validity as a woman.
- This is a common microaggression against transgender people.

Suggested Responses:

- "That's because Yasmin is a real woman."
- "Wow, if I were Yasmin, I might find that really offensive."
- "I understand you meant that as a compliment, but Yasmin's appearance doesn't dictate the reality of her womanhood."

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10 Components of Being an Effective Ally

- 1.** Allies proactively seek understanding and awareness of the marginalization that transgender people face, and advocate for a safer and more affirming world.
- 2.** Allies actively cultivate transgender people's leadership as a contribution toward creating social change.
- 3.** Allies take primary responsibility for learning about how oppression affects the lives of transgender people.
- 4.** Allies seek out transgender people's perspectives as experts on transgender identities, experiences, and needs. Allies amplify the experiences of transgender people to a broader audience.
- 5.** Allies acknowledge their own cisgender privilege and leverage it for the benefit of transgender people.
- 6.** Allies seek to understand the connections between all forms of injustice, and understand how oppressions intersect.
- 7.** Being a cisgender ally to transgender people means seeking understanding and awareness of transgender lives and experiences, and speaking out against injustice directed at transgender people.
- 8.** Allies take pride in their work without being self-congratulatory.
- 9.** Allies seek out and are receptive to feedback from transgender communities and hold themselves accountable to this feedback.
- 10.** Allies call out and raise awareness about ignorance, bias and discrimination toward transgender people, in both individual instances and broader systems of oppression.

*Note: This is not an exhaustive list.