

Dismantling Bias Conference Series

A Relational View of Allyship

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Recommended Citation

Joe, Jennifer and Smith, Wendy (2022) "A Relational View of Allyship," Dismantling Bias Conference Series: Vol. 3 : Iss. 9, Article 5. Abstract of a paper presented at the Dismantling Bias event, organized by E. E. Kossek & T. J. Merriweather. Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN. Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgg/vol3/iss9/5>

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A Relational View of Allyship

Blacks and Hispanics comprise approximately 33% of the U.S. population (The U.S. Census Bureau 2021). Yet among Fortune 500 CEOs, only 1% are Black and 3.5% are Hispanic (Zweigenhaft 2021). Board of directors of U.S. companies offer similar disparate statistics. A recent census finds “no substantive increase in [the] rate of representation” of underrepresented minorities and, noteworthy, a decline in Black male board members (Oven and Akutagawa 2021). Although Black and Hispanic underrepresentation in business leadership has been documented, little is known about how professionals of color overcome racial and other barriers to achieve career success in business and how co-workers can contribute to their success.

This study explores the specific question of how co-workers serve as allies to contribute to on-the-job success for professionals of color. Our research is motivated by audience engagement at Lerner College’s 2020 [Juneteenth Webinar](#) where four Black female professionals discussed their lived experiences around race at work and in society. The webinar was co-sponsored by the University of Delaware Lerner College’s Diversity Council and Women’s Leadership Initiative in the backdrop of the racial reckoning surrounding the murders of Black Americans. The central chat question posed by the audience exceeding 1,000 was, “What can I do?” Participants wanted to know how those with access and in privileged positions could be effective allies.

Recognizing a research void on this topic and the yearning for effective strategies, this study focuses on understanding the mechanics of allyship across race in the workplace from the perspective of professionals of color and their allies. We draw on prior definitions of allyship as “members of advantaged groups engaging in committed action to improve the treatment and status of a disadvantaged group” (Louis, 2019; see also Droogendyk, et.al. 2016; Broido, 2000). Extant studies identify antecedents and processes for effective allyship, including self-reflection and interrogation, sense of responsibility, and building solidarity (Broido, 2000). Other studies examine how allyship stems from early family modeling, and the responses and benefits of allyship behaviors (Duhigg, Rostosky, Gray, & Wimsatt, 2010). Expanding on these foundational insights, we examine how effective allyship forms, develops and endures. We draw on work that engages developmental relationships from a networked perspective (Higgins and Kram, 2000), to identify the practices that enable relationships to be beneficial over time (Ghosh and Reio, 2013).

We address our question through in-depth qualitative analysis of interviews of matched pairs of professionals of color and their allies. We first interviewed middle-management professionals of color in finance, accounting, marketing and sales, followed by interviews of the allies they identified as important to their career advancement. Our approach follows a snowball sampling technique to identify interviewees (Miles and Huberman, 1994). To date we interviewed 15 individuals – 7 professionals of color and 8 allies (9 women and 6 men). We adopt a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz 2003), to systematically yet flexibly move from open coding to more specific themes.

Early data offers key insights. First, allyship is a systemic development of small practices, rather than a formal decision by any person in the relationship. Ally relationships are built over time through micro actions – such as lunching together, seeking advice on a project, going out together for a drink after work, etc. These actions build trust, openness and connection, and allow the parties to minimize their

fears of offending another. This openness allows allies to have difficult conversations and convey negative feedback, while professionals of color could be frank in pushing allies to learn more about the impact of race and increase efforts on addressing race issues at work. Second, allyship is most effective when it is a 'two-way street' – the professionals of color and their allies recognize value and mutual benefit in their relationship. These benefits include both instrumental career and interpersonal social support. Professionals of color reported their allies provided access to institutional sources of power and influence while allies reported finding connections that helped them achieve organizational goals. In the most valuable relationships, both sides report building friendship and support that extended beyond the workplace, which reinforced these relationships. Together, these ideas offer a relational view of allyship that invites an extension of the literature from considering the key antecedents and consequences in allyships to understanding the mutuality and ongoing accomplishments.

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