

# Ally Skills Workshop handout

This is a reference for people participating in the Ally Skills Workshop. It is not intended as a standalone reference. Learn more at: <https://frameshiftconsulting.com/ally-skills-workshop/>

## Purpose

In this workshop, you will learn how and when you can most effectively take action as an ally—someone who has power and privilege in a situation—to fight systemic oppression.

## Basic concepts

- **Privilege:** an unearned advantage given to some people but not all
- **Oppression:** systemic, pervasive inequality present throughout society that benefits people with more privilege and harms those with fewer privileges
- **Marginalized person:** a member of a group that is the primary target of a system of oppression
- **Ally:** a member of a social group that enjoys some privilege that is working to end oppression and understand their own privilege
- **Power:** The ability to control circumstances or access to resources and/or privileges
- **Intersectionality:** The concept that people can be subject to multiple systems of oppression that intersect and interact with each other, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw

**Ally is a verb, not an identity:** You don't have to do anything to be a marginalized person other than simply exist, but you are only an ally when you are taking action to fight oppression. This is why we talk about "ally skills," "acting as an ally," and "ally work" more often than "allies."

### **Sometimes you can act as an ally, sometimes you are the marginalized person:**

Depending on what is most relevant about you to the situation, you may be able to act as an ally in some situations, but be the marginalized person in other situations. In the workshop, we will learn how to identify when we have power and privilege that allows us to act as an ally.

### **People acting as allies are much less likely to face retaliation and more likely to succeed:**

If the marginalized person advocates for themselves, they are likely to be viewed as biased and self-interested. Someone acting as an ally is viewed as altruistic and kind.

## Workshop discussion guidelines

- You may leave or return at any time, for any reason, without explanation
- Anonymize any sensitive stories if you repeat them outside the workshop
- **Focus on what an ally can do** in this situation, not the marginalized person
- There are no trick questions
- Each group has a report out person who takes notes and summarizes what you talked about, and a different person does this for each scenario

- Each group has a moderator whose job is to interrupt people who are talking too much, and invite people who aren't talking as much to speak
- If you tend to dominate conversation, wait for half the group to speak before you speak

## Guidelines for responding to oppression

- Be short, simple, and firm
- Humor usually backfires, avoid it
- Play for the audience
- Practice simple responses
- Pick your battles
- Don't be sexist, homophobic, transphobic, racist, ableist, classist, ageist, body-shaming, or make fun of people for being sexually undesirable, unattractive, etc.

## Guidelines for future ally work

- Set specific goals for yourself for next week/month/year
- Treat ally actions as bare minimum expectation
- Follow and support leaders from marginalized groups
- Follow your discomfort: if something makes you feel bad, find out more and understand why before reacting
- When you make a mistake, acknowledge, apologize, and move on

## Terminology

Using the right words and keeping up with changes in language is important ally work, but changing the language you use takes years. We don't expect you to change all of your language during the workshop, just that you be considerate of others if they ask you to use different words. **If you make a mistake, that's fine! Just acknowledge, apologize, and move on.**

Note: Members of a marginalized group can agree to call themselves anything they want, including terms outsiders should not use. Part of the process of "reclaiming" slurs is members of a marginalized group agreeing to use a slur to refer to each other positively, gradually neutralizing the slur, after which everyone can use it. For example, "queer" is in the process of being reclaimed in many parts of the world.

## Gender

- Cis: your gender is the same as the gender that was assigned to you at birth
- Trans: your gender is different than the gender that was assigned to you at birth
- Use "trans" or "transgender" but do not use "transgendered" or "transsexual"
- Non-binary or genderqueer: "male" or "female" doesn't describe your gender accurately
- When referring to groups by gender, use men for cis and trans men, women for cis and trans women, non-binary people, cis men, cis women, trans men, trans women, people of all genders, folks, people, everyone, all, y'all, all y'all, yinz...

- Don't use "girls" for women 18 years of age and over, "females" for humans, "guys" for groups that are not all men, "ladies," "people with [BODY PART or CHROMOSOME]" instead of "men" or "women"

## Sexuality

- Use straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual/pansexual (attracted to people of more than one gender), asexual (little or no sexual attraction to anyone)
- Queer: catch-all term for anyone who is not a straight cis woman or man (recently reclaimed, may still be offensive in some cultural groups)

## Racial and ethnic groups

- Avoid abbreviated forms of names of racial or ethnic groups
- Use Wikipedia to find preferred terms for racial or ethnic groups
- Don't use "ethnic," "urban," "inner city" or other euphemisms to designate people of a particular race or ethnic group
- "African-American" only applies to Black Americans; use "Black" for all people of (recent) sub-Saharan African descent
- Some people are multi-racial and/or multi-ethnic; e.g., someone can be both white and Latinx, or both Black and Jewish

## Disability and neurodivergence

There is an ongoing debate about which is preferable, "person-first" ("I am a person with disabilities") or "identity-first" ("I am a disabled person") language. While many disabled people strongly prefer identity-first language, person-first is a reasonable default. When referring to a specific person or group, use their preferred terms.

- Use "abled person," "[NAME] is disabled," or "person with disabilities"
- Don't use "the disabled" (referring to a group) or "handicapped"
- Use "wheelchair user," don't use "wheelchair bound" or "confined to a wheelchair"
- Use Deaf for someone who is culturally Deaf (uses sign language, etc.), "deaf" or "hard of hearing" for any person with any level of hearing loss, and "hearing person"
- Someone whose brain works the way society expects is "neurotypical," someone whose brain does not is "neurodivergent," and a group of people with different neurotypes is "neurodiverse"
- Only use respectfully in cases of self-disclosure: ADD/ADHD, Autistic, autism spectrum, schizophrenic, bipolar, etc.
- Don't use "lame," "dumb," "retard," "stupid," "crazy," etc. - instead use "foolish," or a specific adjective like "crowded" or "disorganized"
- Don't use names of specific disabilities as metaphors or similes to indicate badness

## Body size

- Describe body size using neutral descriptions: "higher weight," "lower weight," "larger body," "smaller build," "medium size"

- Don't use medicalized or value-judgement terms for body size like "healthy weight," "obese," "struggles with his weight", "normal weight," "overweight"
- The word "fat" is in the process of being reclaimed; if your audience understands that you aren't using it pejoratively, go ahead and use "fat" and "thin"
- You can't tell by looking at someone whether they struggle with an eating disorder or body image disorder

### **Religion, class, age, family role, etc.**

- Speak respectfully about religious or spiritual beliefs, with the exception of any bigotry or intolerance that is part of those beliefs
- Don't use stereotypes about working class people (e.g. janitor), adults of particular ages, people with family roles (mother, grandparent, etc.), or caregivers
- Don't use "politically correct" in a serious or literal way, as it is a derogatory label created to criticize and deride the concept of "treating people with respect"
- Use "undocumented" not "illegal immigrant" or "illegal"

### **Websites**

<https://frameshiftconsulting.com/ally-skills-workshop> Ally Skills Workshop slides, video, and handouts (including this handout).

<https://dearally.com/> Dear Ally Skills Teacher, an advice column about ally skills by Valerie Aurora.

<https://frameshiftconsulting.com/meeting-skills/> Effective and just meetings have people filling four specific meeting roles: moderator, facilitator, note-taker, and timekeeper.

<https://frameshiftconsulting.com/2020/04/02/tips-for-safer-zoom-meetings/> How to keep harassers and trolls out of Zoom meetings.

[http://awea.org.nz/allies\\_north\\_america](http://awea.org.nz/allies_north_america) Collection of ally skills useful to people acting as allies to indigenous peoples in Canada, the U.S., and Aotearoa New Zealand.

<https://reconciliationnsw.org.au/what-can-i-do/> Resources for people acting as allies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia.

<https://deconstruction.club/> Deconstruction: Anti-Racist Media & Action Guide for people acting as allies towards Black people in the United States.

The Wikipedia pages on names for racial and ethnic groups are remarkably useful.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradox\\_of\\_tolerance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradox_of_tolerance) Useful explanation of why a tolerant culture must be intolerant of intolerance.

<https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender> A guide to writing or speaking about transgender people or issues.

<https://captainawkward.com/> The Captain Awkward advice blog has great tips for how to say uncomfortable things to people, enforce boundaries, and similar skills.

<https://danceswithfat.wordpress.com/blog/> The Dances with Fat blog explains what's wrong with how our culture talks about body size and includes specific advice for allies.

<https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/08/size-discrimination-facts/> Information on body size discrimination

<https://hypatia.ca/2014/09/13/charles-rules-of-argument-the-short-version/> Charles' Rules of Argument are useful to avoid wasting your time and energy.

[https://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Tone\\_argument](https://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Tone_argument) Resources for identifying and responding to the tone argument (hint: usually involves the word "tone").

<http://www.sirc.org/publik/drinking4.html> How societal attitudes affect response to alcohol.

<https://biasinterrupters.org/> Specific bias interrupting techniques for the workplace.

[https://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Community\\_anti-harassment](https://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Community_anti-harassment) Resources for developing a community code of conduct.

<https://adacamp.org/> Resources for running an inclusive conference from the Ada Initiative.

<http://tinyurl.com/inclusive-offsites> How to run inclusive offsites, by Sara Smollett, Mary Gardiner, et al.

## Relevant papers and articles

"Does valuing diversity result in worse performance ratings for minority and female leaders?" by David Hekman, Stefanie Johnson, Wei Yang, Maw Der Foo  
<https://amj.aom.org/content/early/2016/03/03/amj.2014.0538.abstract>

"When the 'White Tears' Just Keep Coming" by Leah Donella  
<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/11/28/649537891/when-the-white-tears-just-keep-coming>

"Research: Vague Feedback Is Holding Women Back" by Shelley Correll and Caroline Simard  
<https://hbr.org/2016/04/research-vague-feedback-is-holding-women-back>

"The one word men never see in their performance reviews" by Kathleen Davis  
<https://www.fastcompany.com/3034895/strong-female-lead/the-one-word-men-never-see-in-their-performance-reviews>

"Alcohol and Inclusivity: Planning Tech Events with Non-Alcoholic Options" by Kara Sowles  
<https://blog.valerieaurora.org/2018/03/30/cross-post-alcohol-and-inclusivity-planning-tech-events-with-non-alcoholic-options/>

"What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team" by Charles Duhigg (psychological safety)  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html>

"No more rock stars: how to stop abuse in tech communities" by Leigh Honeywell, Valerie Aurora, and Mary Gardiner <https://hypatia.ca/2016/06/21/no-more-rock-stars/>

"The Al Capone Theory of sexual harassment" by Leigh Honeywell and Valerie Aurora  
<https://blog.valerieaurora.org/2017/07/18/the-al-capone-theory-of-sexual-harassment/>

"A post-election guide to changing hearts and minds" by Valerie Aurora  
<https://captainawward.com/2016/11/21/guest-post-a-post-election-guide-to-changing-hearts-and-minds/>

"How to Respond to an Offensive Comment at Work" by Amy Gallo  
<https://hbr.org/2017/02/how-to-respond-to-an-offensive-comment-at-work>

"How 'good intent' undermines diversity and inclusion" by Annalee Flower Horne  
<https://thebias.com/2017/09/26/how-good-intent-undermines-diversity-and-inclusion/>

"Why do remote meetings suck so much?" by Chelsea Troy

<https://chelseatroy.com/2018/03/29/why-do-remote-meetings-suck-so-much/>

"Can we please stop body shaming ourselves and each other as a form of female bonding?" by Jennifer Peepas

<https://captainawkward.com/2014/06/12/588-can-we-please-stop-body-shaming-ourselves-and-each-other-as-a-form-of-female-bonding/>

"Harvard's systemic nepotism revealed: only 57 percent of admitted white students were on merit" by Nicole Karlis

<https://www.salon.com/2019/10/06/harvards-systemic-nepotism-revealed-43-percent-of-admitted-white-students-were-legacies/>

"Caste Privilege 101: A Primer for the Privileged" by Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Sinthujan Varatharajah <http://theaerogram.com/caste-privilege-101-primer-privileged/>

"What if I say the wrong thing on race?" by Michelle Silverthorn

<https://michellesilverthorn.com/blog/how-to-create-an-antiracist-workplace>

"Measuring diversity and while controlling for legal risks" by Joan C. Williams and Jamie Dolkas

<https://hbr.org/2022/03/data-driven-diversity>

"I Can Fry if I Want To: Why Are Females Chided for Vocal Tics That Guys Use Too?" by Krissy Eliot

<https://alumni.berkeley.edu/california-magazine/online/i-can-fry-if-i-want-why-are-females-chided-vocal-tics-guys/>

## Books

*The most complete and up to date book about acting as an ally at work, presented in the context of anti-racism in the U.S. and easily generalizable to multiple systems of oppression:*

"How to Talk to Your Boss About Race" by Y-Vonne Hutchinson

<https://www.amazon.com/Talk-Your-Boss-About-Race/dp/0593418093>

"Better Allies: Everyday Actions to Create Inclusive, Engaging Workplaces" by Karen Catlin

<https://betterallies.com/>

"So You Want to Talk About Race" by Ijeoma Oluo

<https://www.sealpress.com/titles/ijeoma-oluo/so-you-want-to-talk-about-race/9781580056779>

"How to Respond to Code of Conduct Reports" by Valerie Aurora and Mary Gardiner

<https://frameshiftconsulting.com/code-of-conduct-book/>

"Is Shame Necessary?" by Jennifer Jacquet <http://www.isshamenecessary.com/>

"What Works for Women at Work: Four Patterns Working Women Need to Know" by Joan C. Williams and Rachel Dempsey <https://nyupress.org/books/9781479835454/>

## License and attribution

This handout is licensed Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 Unported (CC BY-SA 4.0) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

© 2016 - 2022 Frame Shift Consulting LLC <http://frameshiftconsulting.com>

© 2016 Dr. Sheila Addison <http://www.drsheilaaddison.com/>

© 2011 - 2015 The Ada Initiative <http://adainitiative.org>  
Lead author: Valerie Aurora