How to be an ally: A toolkit to promote racial equity in your organization

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BLG Firm members recently attended *Developing a Roadmap to Allyship*, a three-part series led by sociologist and author Dr. Tsedale M. Melaku, PhD, which addressed the practical implications of systemic racism embedded in organizations and how to become effective allies in our personal and professional settings.

In a co-authored article titled *Be a Better Ally*, Dr. Tsedale M. Melaku defines *allyship* as "a *strategic* mechanism used by individuals to become *collaborators*, *accomplices*, and *coconspirators* who fight injustice and promote equity in the workplace through supportive personal relationships and public acts of sponsorship and advocacy."

Beginning the journey to allyship

Dr. Melaku described how *systemic racism*[1] and a *White racial frame*[2] cause Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) professionals to face incredible challenges gaining entry into organizations and accessing professional development or advancement opportunities.

How to take action:

To begin the journey to become effective allies, Dr. Melaku shared that organizations should:

1. acknowledge and recognize that BIPOC individuals are often disadvantaged and disproportionately burdened from work (both home and professional) with little to no support systems in place;
2. practice accountability; and
3. acknowledge deficiencies within the organization to make proactive, intentional and targeted changes.

Practical implications of systemic racism

Dr. Melaku drew from her book, *You Don't Look Like a Lawyer*, and shared that dominant White culture heavily contributes to the large amount of *invisible labour*

clauses[3] and *inclusion taxes*[4] for BIPOC (specifically Black women), who are overwhelmingly overburdened with diversity, equity and inclusion work.

Dr. Melaku stated that the perceived abilities and competence of professionals of colour are often tied to their appearance; the more ethnic they appear, the less capable they are deemed to be. Dr. Melaku gives the example of Black women being viewed as inferior to White women in many situations, with particular markers such as hair triggering this perception.

This issue, partnered with the tendency by recruiters and hiring managers to use certain culturally loaded terms and language, make the recruitment process particularly difficult for BIPOC professionals. For example, phrases like “fitting in” or “being a good fit” often used in recruiting practices actually neutralize racist notions and make the pressure to conform very demanding.

Bridging the allyship gap

In her research, Dr. Melaku has found that the key areas to address within organizations are recruitment (hiring practices, bias disruptors, interview training), professional development (training, mentors) and advancement (sponsors, allies, networking).

How to take action:

In order to “bridge the allyship gap” and develop the awareness to become effective allies, Dr. Melaku shared actionable steps to building your toolkit to inclusivity, without adding invisible labour:

1. be intentional and provocative by speaking up for your BIPOC colleagues, even when it’s hard;
2. do not minimize experiences with racism, sexism or any form of discrimination;
3. promote racial equity 24/7/365 and deploy your privilege to advance equity;
4. hold your organization accountable to their allyship statements, and acknowledge and claim your own mistakes; and
5. have the difficult conversations and be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

“We also have to be kind to ourselves while we’re doing this work. All of us, we are all on a learning journey and we have to understand and remember that self-care for each of us is critical for our survival. Take the time to do the work and trust me, you’ll see the change,” Dr. Melaku concluded.

[1] *Systemic racism* involves both the deep structures and the surface structures of racial oppression: anti-Black practices, political-economic power of Whites, racist framing created by Whites to maintain their privilege and power.

[2] A *White racial frame* is the dominant White perspective that only views things from a White standpoint, ignoring the perspectives and positions of people of colour, thus reinforcing White privilege and power.

[3] An *invisible labour clause* is an unwritten article in the employment contract of marginalized groups that require them to perform added unrecognized, uncompensated labour to navigate social and professional settings.

[4] An *inclusion tax* represents the additional resources "spent" by marginalized groups to be allowed in White institutional spaces and to adhere to or resist White norms. This includes emotional, financial, cognitive and relational labour.

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