

“Allyship”



Introduction

During our inaugural MCEL convening in December 2017 we explored the article “Why Race and Culture Matter in the C-Suite.” Like many other readings, the article unearthed the stark realities of the very minimum representation of males of color in corporate leadership roles. They shared the leadership stories of several men of color who have been very successful in matriculating to the highest leadership level of their organization.

White Ally

Our group spent a considerable amount of time discussing the notion of a “white ally.” As we unpacked the concept of “white ally” the group discussed both the value and challenges surrounding this idea. Many participants identified individuals they considered to be their “white ally”. These allies tended to play four roles:

1. **Opening doors** to others in the ally’s white network and made their presence and engagement in the network acceptable.
 2. **Mentoring** to support their career aspirations.
 3. **Advocating** for their advancement with white decision makers.
 4. **Coaching** on how to navigate white political power structures.
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The group generally felt that having a white ally had been an important tool in their ability to progress as executive leaders. Many felt they would not be where they are today without knowing and leveraging a white ally. While there was an appreciation for their white allies, the group also discussed frustration they felt for even needing a white ally. Needing a white ally seemed to indicate that they were in a dependent relationship with their white ally and their success was dependent on having a white ally instead of dependent on their own experience, intellect, and effort.

The conversation moved into the idea of a white leader having a black ally. The example was shared of a white leader wanting to engage with an African-American church and needing a black ally to open the door with the pastor. Without the black ally making the introduction and giving the white leader some initial credibility, it would be nearly impossible for the white leader to have an authentic relationship with the pastor. This ally relationship also included ongoing coaching by the black ally on how to navigate the African-American political power structure.

This exploration of both white and black allies generated thinking around a new term - "allyship"

Allyship

The term "allyship" is intended to acknowledge the need for allies to support leaders in cutting across racial and institutional boundaries. As we discussed both black and white leaders could benefit from being in "allyship" with each other. This sense of allyship moves the relationship from one person being dependent on another, to one of codependency, where both leaders are benefiting and able to extend their leadership through the ally relationship. While we discussed this in terms of black and white leaders, the concept could be similarly leveraged in male - female, latino - white, black - latino, asian - black, and many other different racial, cultural, & gender relationships. To be effective leaders we all need to seek out these boundary crossing relationships and be smart about leveraging our relationships to gain access and insight to other cultural-political structures. We can't be the leaders we need to be without playing effectively in multiple cross cultural environments.

Allyship requires a trusting relationship that is open and honest. A space where there is truth-telling and from each allies perspective. In the absence of an authentic relationship there may not be true allyship. In fact if the allies are not viewed by each other as equals, it is probably not allyship. In addition, there has to be a reciprocal level of accountability and honesty. They must be able to call one another out when necessary. In short, being an ally means that you absolutely tell one another the truth, even when it is uncomfortable.

Allyship vs Sponsorship

What is the difference between allyship and sponsorship? Is sponsorship a subset of allyship or is it something uniquely different? Abintegro.com describes a sponsor in the following way:

A sponsor is the person that could make your potential career journey a reality. If someone decides to sponsor you it is because they believe in you. They will do all they can to help you succeed because, once they have chosen you, you, in effect, carry their brand.

They can make you visible to the top people inside and outside of your organisation, they can help with pay rises and promotions and get you involved in high-profile assignments. They will also offer protection in times of trouble.

Using this definition, everyone reading this can probably point to a person who has acted as a sponsor for them. Who has sponsored you? Were they also an ally?

Our goal is to add to this text by discussing the following questions and capturing our collective thinking. We will be breaking into groups and tackling the following subjects:

Role of Ally

- Do you agree with the text's defined roles?
- What other roles do allies play?
- Are the roles of allies the same, regardless of race and gender?

Ally to Allyship

- Does this text go too far in trying to equalize the roles in "allyship"? Are they really equal?

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- Is there reciprocity in the allyship? What do both allies get out the allyship? What is in it, for both parties?
 - How are countries who are allies (NATO) similar or different from our working definition of allyship?

Race & Allyship

- How do we ensure that by leveraging white allies we don't perpetuate the white power structure?
- Why do white men really become allies? What's in it for them?
- Why do men of color really become allies? What's in it for them?

Creating Allyship Relationships

- How do you select an ally?
- Should we formalize allyship relationships? What would that look like?
- Can there be allyship in the absence of an authentic relationship?

Sponsorship

- What is the difference between allyship and sponsorship?
- Can sponsor be allies? Can allies be sponsors?
- Does sponsorship require a hierarchical relationship? Does the sponsor need to be higher on the career ladder?

Strategic Leveraging of Allyship

- What would it look like to take allyship to scale in your organization?
- How do you lead this work?
- Is being in allyship with someone a short term strategy? When will we not need allies?