5 Ways to Practice Allyship in the Workplace

A toolkit for allies of the LGBTQIA+ community

Lyra

June is Pride Month

June is Pride Month—a celebration of the LGBTQIA+ community to commemorate the historic Stonewall Uprising, when police raided the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay bar in New York City. This tipping point event is commonly thought of as the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement in the United States.

While legistlation and culture have come a long way, members of the LGBTQIA+ community still face discrimination, prejudice, denial of civil and human rights, harassment and family rejection. As a result, those who identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community are two to four times more likely to experience mental health challenges compared to heterosexual or cisgender individuals. This is particularly true for those with intersecting racial or socioeconomic identities.

So, what can allies do to help create a supportive environment in the workplace? This toolkit provides five ways to practice allyship and create an affirming culture for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Hi! I'm Dr. Joe Grasso.

As the Director of Workforce Mental Health at Lyra, my job is to share helpful, research-based insights with you—so that you can lead a mentally healthy life at work, and at home.

Practicing Allyship in the Workplace

1. **Reflect on how you want to position yourself as an ally. Approach conversations with empathy and openness as you learn.** Most people know a family member or a friend who is a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. When approaching conversations with your colleagues, treat this person the way you would want your family member or friend to be treated.

   Respond to LGBTQIA+ colleagues sharing their typical day-to-day experiences as you would with other colleagues. For example, if your colleague mentions going to dinner with their same sex partner, don't be silent. Rather, simply ask a normal follow up question like, "How was the restaurant?". If they share about something directly specific to their experience as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community and it's a topic with which you're unfamiliar, feel free to let them know you're interested in learning more about their experience and offer follow-up questions that demonstrate your openness and curiosity.

2. **Don't expect your LGBTQIA+ colleagues to educate you on LGBTQIA+ experiences. Seek out what you can about LGBTQIA+ culture, including history and movements.** Some people may not feel comfortable sharing their experiences or identities being LGBTQIA+. Conversely, some people may never have had the opportunity or an accepting space where they could freely share their story and identities.

   Whenever possible, research your questions so that the burden of education does not fall on the member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Use your emotional intelligence to judge whether or not you have a foundation of trust with your colleague before asking them about their experiences.

   Let's say you have some familiarity with a colleague, and they've shared their experiences with you in the past. Be honest and vulnerable—"I don't know a lot about this. Are you willing and able to share more about your

experiences with me?" If someone is uninterested in sharing about their experience or discussing broad LGBTQIA+ issues with you, respect their decision and their boundaries, but consider channeling your interest into seeking information from reputable sources.

Learning about moments in history that impacted the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights is useful in providing context for the struggles and oppression that some of your colleagues may experience. Here are several places to start (and note, many important moments are not listed here):

- Compton's Cafeteria Riot
- Stonewall Riots
- Don't Ask, Don't Tell repeal

3. **Understand that LGBTQIA+ identities represent many preferences, expressions, and backgrounds.** LGBTQIA+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questoning or Queer, Intersex and, Asexual, with the plus sign representing all others whose identities do not fit within the other letters in the acronym (such as pansexual or gender-fluid).

Don't make assumptions about the gender or sexual identity of your colleagues. Check your own implicit biases and recognize that your LGBTQIA+ colleagues may experience the world differently than you do but that the community isn't a monolith—each LGBTQIA+ person's experiences and expressions of identity will differ.

See here for a helpful resource of terms that folks in the LGBTQIA+ community use to identify themselves.

4. **Show visual signs of being LGBTQIA+-affirming.** Showing your allyship in a visual way within the workplace can help your LGBTQIA+ colleagues feel supported. One way to show allyship to trans, queer, and nonbinary community members is to display your pronouns (i.e. they/them, ze/zie/hir, he/him/his or she/her/hers) in your email signature, name tag, and other places where your name appears. This promotes an environment where others may feel safe to do the same. In a shared workplace, you

could consider displaying a sign, sticker, flag, or other mementos at your desk that demonstrate your allyship with the LGBTQIA+ community.

Don't make assumptions about someone's gender identity. If you're not sure what pronoun to use, simply ask, "What pronouns do you use?". Better yet, make it part of your company culture to regularly introduce yourself with your pronouns.

If you hear a colleague misuse another colleague's pronouns, politely correct them by saying, "Hey Bob, Alex actually uses they/them pronouns, not she/her pronouns."

5 **Intervene on microaggressions and harassment** If you witness a subtle expression of disciminiation or negative bias (i.e. a [microaggression](#)) or harassment, speak up. If your colleague who experienced harassment or discrimination is still present, ask them, "Is everything okay?". Your goal should be to make them feel supported and protected.

If the person who was harassed or discriminated against is not there, consider giving one of the following pieces of feedback to the person who committed the microagression: "I don't think that's appropriate" or, "That was unsupportive of the _____ community." It's a natural human instinct to be afraid of retaliation, but just calling something out in the moment can help to quickly diffuse the situation.

Approach the situation with empathy, as the person who committed the microaggression might not realize that what they did or said was wrong. Call the person "in" by pulling them aside to explain why their action or statement was offensive or hurtful, followed by brief guidance on how they can be inclusive and respectful in the future.

Lyra's expert mental health care providers can help you and those you care about learn personalized tools to improve your relationships, communication, and start feeling better. To get started with Lyra, your mental health benefit, start [here](#).