

## Becoming an Ally

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### Background and context

Racism is an ugly word and those on the receiving end of racial abuse, racial harassment and racial violence, know only too well the impact it has on individuals, communities and the wider diaspora. The aftermath since the death of George Floyd has led to the question of “What can I do?” primarily from some of our white colleagues. Increasingly the role of becoming an ally is increasingly considered one way forward. But what does it mean to be an ally and what are the practical steps needed to make those initial steps? This information sheet offers some introductory commentary as a start.

### But first a bit of history: Peter Norman – an ally in 1968

The 1968 Olympics is remembered for the stand taken by two African-American athletes – Tommie Smith and John Carlos. The Civil Rights Movement was still mourning the loss of Martin Luther King Jr in April of that year and facing continued institutionalised and systemic racial discrimination including police brutality. The gold medal for the 200 metre final was won by Tommie Smith, in second place gaining the silver medal was Peter Norman, a white Australian and the bronze medallist was John Carlos. Before setting off to the medal ceremony, Smith and Carlos discussed the action they would take on the podium. Both were members of the [Olympic Project for Human Rights](#) (OPHR) and wore badges. They asked Norman if he believed in human rights and he said he did and would stand by them. Carlos and Smith said they would be walking to the podium wearing their tracksuit, badge, black socks – to symbolise black poverty and black gloves, unity. Carlos realised that he had forgotten his gloves and Norman suggested that Smith and Carlos wore a glove each. Norman also wore an OPHR badge which he had loaned from Paul Hoffman, a white American rower and activist with OPHR. At the start of the American national anthem, Smith and Carlos bowed their heads and raised their gloved fist to highlight the racial injustices in America. The American athletes were expelled from the Games. Peter Norman for his actions was ostracised by his country and the media until his death in 2006. Norman did not compete in another Olympic Games despite qualifying on numerous occasions. In 2012, the Australian Parliament finally apologised and acknowledged the silver medal won by Norman in 1968 stating that:

*“This house acknowledges the bravery of Peter Norman in donning an Olympic Project for Human Rights badge on the podium, in solidarity with African-American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who gave the ‘black power’ salute.*

*Apologises to Peter Norman for the wrong done by Australia in failing to send him to the 1972 Munich Olympics, despite repeatedly qualifying; and belatedly recognises the powerful role that Peter Norman played in furthering racial equality”.*

Whilst the cost of being an ally and taking a stand left Peter Norman shunned by Australia, he refused to condemn the action of Smith and Carlos. As he stated in the film about his life *Salute* (2012):

*“I couldn’t see why a black man couldn’t drink the same water from a water fountain, take the same bus or go to the same school as a white man.”*

(Peter Norman, 2012)

### **What does it mean to be an ally?**

Before becoming an ally it is important to have a clear sense of what the concept ‘ally’ means. What is evident from a number of commentators is that an ally is a person that is informed, trained, educated, listens, use their privilege to stand up and speak up, is brave and has uncomfortable conversations, calls out racism, report transgressions, sees who is missing from the room, apologises, prepares to take some form of action to fight for the rights of a marginalised group, talks to marginalised group, stands alongside and be prepared to acknowledge and respect others truths and experience like micro-aggressions. Several definitions of determining the role and characteristic of an ally are suggested below:

- An ally is a person that wants to fight for the equality of a marginalised group that they’re not part of. (Maxwell, 2019).
- An ally is a person of one social identity group who stands up in support of another group; typically a member of a dominant group who support those who have been disenfranchised, discriminated against or treated unjustly. (Evelyn, Creators For Change).
- Allyship is a proactive, ongoing, and incredibly difficult practice of unlearning and re-evaluating in which a person of privilege works in solidarity and partnership with a marginalised group of people to help take down the systems that challenge the group’s basic rights, equal access and ability to thrive in our society. (Rochester Racial Justice Toolkit).

There are some common themes to consider when becoming an ally. Know **the issues** – what is the state of racism in the UK? Consider systemic and institutional racism and look around your institution and see who makes up the university executive board, or heads up the Schools and Colleges, professional services, are professors or senior academics. Scrutinising

staff statistics further demonstrate inequalities with Black and other minority ethnic staff being often being 'stuck' at certain grades, missing out on promotions, or not gaining the recognition of work achieved above and beyond their pay grade.

## How to become an ally?

### As an individual and colleague

As an individual and colleague have conversations about race, racism and anti-racism. Educate yourself (do have a look at the resources suggested at the end) and undertake unconscious bias training/ally training. Be aware of your team's action points in terms of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion as it relates to staff and students. In team meetings listen and learn, do not interrupt, advocate and encourage, acknowledge and attribute ideas suggested by Black staff.

### As management

As a manager, try to advocate all the above as an individual and colleague. Equality, diversity and inclusion should be a standing order on the agenda of your team meeting. Your team may not reflect a diverse work force so review your recruitment policy and be explicit in your adverts to encourage recruitment of staff from under-represented groups. Explore the university's Race Equality Charter Mark and discuss within your teams how you intend to achieve the outcomes identified in charter mark for example internships, mentoring schemes and co-creators. Consider all the special days and months in the year and encourage staff and student involvement. Black History Month takes place in October; members of the team could consider organising a programme and/or collaborating with the BAME Staff Network. Be mindful of micro aggressions.

### As an Institution

If they really want to stamp out the scourge of racism, universities need to take a much more proactive approach.

( Micha Frazer-Carroll)

Institutions can provide an ally friendly working environment through culture, governance, accountability, university action policy, the Race Equality Charter Mark, the Higher Education Race Action Group, European Human Rights Commission, The Equality Act 2010, its use of physical space including the Library, statues and monuments. University Executive Board members can make a major impact by writing their ally statement and working closely the BAME Staff Network.

## Summary

Allyship is the continuous process in which someone with privilege and power seeks to first learn about the experiences of a marginalized group of people, and then ultimately empathise with their challenges and build relationships with that group of people.

The role of an ally includes (but is not limited to):

- Being able to listen, and shine a spotlight on those whose voices are often unheard.

- Recognizing your own privilege and power, and using that privilege to lift others up.
- Being aware of implicit biases you might have.
- Supporting the group you're allying by letting them speak for themselves whenever possible.
- Not expecting special recognition for being an ally, and not taking credit for the ideas of the marginalized group.
- Not becoming a white saviour

Finally, we can all be better allies so keep accountable, use your platform for change and stand alongside those who need our support most.

### Resources - Key books, articles, YouTube and films

- University of Birmingham, Library Services resource: [Equality and Diversity Guide](#)  
A range of books, articles and films – developed by Beverley Maynard and Jon Andrews
- What happens when I try to talk race with white people - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SynR1NYcpo>
- Thoughts on white privilege and how to be an ally in a racist world by Jack Monroe - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSrUoAbecU8>
- BBC On This Day 1950-2005 – an history of race relations - [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/themes/society/race/uk\\_race\\_relations/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/themes/society/race/uk_race_relations/default.stm)
- Bhopal, K. (2018) *White Privilege* - <https://www.amazon.co.uk/White-privilege-Kalwant-Bhopal/dp/144733597X>
- Bishop, A. (2015) *Becoming an Ally* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) Fernwood: Nova Scotia
- Epler, M. (2018) Being a better ally at work TedTalk - [https://www.ted.com/talks/melinda\\_epler\\_3\\_ways\\_to\\_be\\_a\\_better\\_ally\\_in\\_the\\_workplace/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/melinda_epler_3_ways_to_be_a_better_ally_in_the_workplace/transcript?language=en)
- Gazzainiga, R. (2020) Peter Norman. The White Man in the Photo - <https://thewire.in/sport/peter-norman-the-white-man-in-that-photo>
- Jeon, H. (2020) How to Be an Ally to the Black Lives Matter Movement, Now and Moving Forward - <https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/a32854303/what-is-allyship/>
- Kendi, I.X. (2018) *How to be an antiracist* - [https://www.amazon.co.uk/s?k=%E2%80%9Chow+to+bean+antiracist%E2%80%9D+by+ibram+x.+kendi&i=stripbooks&dc&ref=a9\\_sc\\_1](https://www.amazon.co.uk/s?k=%E2%80%9Chow+to+bean+antiracist%E2%80%9D+by+ibram+x.+kendi&i=stripbooks&dc&ref=a9_sc_1)

- Maxwell, F.M. (2019) What it means to be an ally - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGHU5Uc378k>
- Noah, Trevor – Commentary on George Floyd and Racism in the USA - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4amCfVbA\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4amCfVbA_c)
- Norman, P. (2012) *Salute* Film directed by Matt Norman
- Obioma Ugoala (2020) How to be an ally - [https://twitter.com/politicsjoe\\_uk/status/1268264740171759616?lang=en-gb](https://twitter.com/politicsjoe_uk/status/1268264740171759616?lang=en-gb)
- Rochester Racial Justice Toolkit - <https://thetoolkit.wixsite.com/toolkit/racial-justice-101>
- West, K. (2019) *I Can't be Racist* BBC Sounds - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0002rkq>
- White privilege – The Alice Cooper incident - <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/26/us/central-park-video-dog-video-african-american-trnd/index.html>