

Five Attributes of Trans Allies

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Abstract

Last week in my Transgender Studies class, and also at a Diversity Day presentation that I made on the Auraria Campus, we talked about allies. In my opinion, allies are an important component of any group. They add numbers, they add voices, and in some cases, they bring a certain amount of power that is [...]

Article

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In my opinion, allies are an important component of any group. They add numbers, they add voices, and in some cases, they bring a certain amount of power that is lacking because of the way that a particular group is seen in the “mainstream,” where the group is trying to gain at least equality, if not acceptance.

That last contribution is unfortunate, but true. Without allies, many groups would not be able to move forward as rapidly and as successfully as they do with outside support. Allies are an important component of any movement. I have written about allies before, but I think it’s always a good time to revisit the topic, so I would like to outline what I consider to be five important attributes of trans allies:

1. A trans ally acknowledges his/her/hir own power and privilege and is aware of it, but also acknowledges ours. In other words, a trans ally understands that we are not victims and don’t need rescuing, but also understands that the support of allies is beneficial to our community. Trans allies prefer to help us develop and utilize our personal power in situations where they have it and we don’t, rather than take over and wield their own power while we are silenced. I have done many co-presentations with non-trans allies (who are all fantastic, by the way), and a couple of times, I have felt almost used as a poster child to make a point about the injustices to which trans people are subjected. While I appreciate the recognition of those injustices, and while I appreciate that non-trans people just learning about the topic might be more open to receiving this information from another non-trans person, I also feel that this drains my own personal power and removes my voice - and I do have one - from the conversation. Of course, not all trans people have the same level of personal power, and for each of us, the amount of power we have depends on the situation at hand. But when we do have it, we need to be able to use it.
2. A trans ally speaks up for us, but doesn’t speak for us. No matter how many trans people an ally knows and no matter how long [pullquote align=”right”]We should recognize and thank allies. That’s extremely important, and when we take them for granted, they can easily disappear.[/pullquote]he/she/ze has been involved in the community, an ally understands that trans

people need to speak for themselves and that we are the best ones to describe our own experiences. At the very beginning of my transition, I was on an LGBT Advisory Board to a particular organization. When we were doing some “LGBT advising,” someone asked what “transgender” actually was. Being the only trans member of the group, I should have been the one to field that question. Instead, the group’s leader, a gay non-trans man, took it upon himself to do so - and he got some of the information wrong. It’s hard to believe now, but I didn’t speak up. I had not yet found my voice. But it did teach me a lesson about who is truly an ally and who would rather just see themselves as important. Regardless, we definitely need other voices, people who have our backs, and people who will speak up for us, particularly when we aren’t present. A chorus of trans and allied voices creates perfect harmony (I can’t believe I just wrote that corny cliché).

3. A trans ally utilizes books, websites, films, conferences, and other resources to learn about the trans community, in addition to asking questions of trans people when it is appropriate. Learning about the trans community should not be an effort for an ally. An ally is truly interested in learning the information. I have had prospective allies say to me, “I would like to be an ally, but I know nothing about this. What can you tell me?” In an educational setting, where my purpose for being there is to teach about trans issues, this is entirely appropriate. But when I’m at a party or dinner or just hanging out, I would rather not “start from the beginning.” I think most of us would prefer that a would-be ally do some self-education and then ask us to fill in some blanks or clear up some misunderstandings.

4. A trans ally works for inclusion, not just diversity. In other words, adding a “T” to your organization’s name or displaying photos of trans people on your website might reflect diversity, but it does not reflect inclusion. Diversity involves diverse populations being visible and represented in your organization. Inclusion involves all those diverse populations working on behalf of your organization, including in positions of leadership, power, and influence. You can’t have inclusion without diversity, but you can definitely have diversity without inclusion. Both are necessary. How many trans people have gone to an “LGBT” organization, only to discover that there are really no services for trans people, and the “LG” (rarely B) people there don’t know much, if anything, about trans issues or resources? It happens every day. Don’t stick a representative picture on a poster and assume that your job is done. Diversity and inclusion are two different animals. Look at it this way: Diversity is “I’m throwing a party and everyone’s invited.” Inclusion is “Let’s throw a party.”

5. A trans ally works to forward trans equality even when trans people aren’t around. Trans rights and trans equality are part of an ally’s life, and that concern exists even when no trans people are present and even when no trans people are aware of what the ally is doing. Being an ally is something that you live, not something that you turn on and off depending on the situation.

We should recognize and thank allies. That’s extremely important, and when we take them for granted, they can easily disappear. Allies don’t have to hang around. But a true ally doesn’t do it for the recognition. The notion of trans rights and equality is simply incorporated into their being. They live it and they act on that value day to day. In other words, an ally’s work is never done (another corny cliché).

There are certainly plenty more characteristics of a trans ally. These are just a few of my favorites. And I think that these apply just as much to trans people who want to be an ally for a group of which they are not a member. We need to remember what we want and need from others, and then take it upon ourselves to bring those characteristics and actions to our own life and our own roles as allies.

Readers, what else would you like to add?

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