

How To Be An Ally

By Marti Abernathey

Published September 12, 2009

https://www.transadvocate.com/how-to-be-an-ally_n_1395.htm

Abstract

Privilege is a nasty thing. It steals perspective, traps us in mindsets and views that make it near impossible to comprehend what a marginalized person is going through. It is, invariably, the worst obstacle facing any ally of any marginalized group. What I say here is probably applicable to any context of ally and oppressed [...]

Article

Privilege is a nasty thing. It steals perspective, traps us in mindsets and views that make it near impossible to comprehend what a marginalized person is going through. It is, invariably, the worst obstacle facing any ally of any marginalized group.

What I say here is probably applicable to any context of ally and oppressed but I'll stick with the trans angle, as it is what I know the best. Some of this might be lifted straight from my twitter account because I said it well there. Don't feel too offended by the recycling. XD

At its most simple, the concept of an ally is one who is in alliance with you. Alliance is in any context merely a mutually beneficial arrangement to advance common goals and interests. It means that your goals need to align with at least some of the goals of your allied members. And that the arrangement taken must benefit all parties involved. When it comes to marginalization, privilege, bigotry, -isms and alliance, things get a bit more complex. The alliance is only truly beneficial to the marginalized party if privilege is overcome long enough to achieve forward motion in social reform. Basically, lateral moves, a lack of any activity or any action that furthers, enables or ignores the marginalization of the marginalized party is not beneficial to them. Therefore it does not fit the boundaries of an alliance.

Let's say you're playing a real time strategy video game. Your base is under attack. If your ally sits back and watches your little soldiers die and your buildings burn, then that is a violation of the mutualistic nature of alliance. If your ally offers to trade some resources to your enemies, while they are attacking you, then they are in violation of the mutualistic nature of alliance. Generally a privileged person isn't being harmed by helping us. They will always have that privilege for as long as the system exists and works and will likely be spared what we go through as a result, even when supporting us. Our aims (which are basically, honor our bodily rights and respect our needs) do not in any way clash with their aims (unless their aim is to dominate, control, harm or damage us). So generally an alliance with a marginalized party is almost always beneficial to a non marginalized party (in the given context). Especially in this day and age, when we have the Liberal Reputation Points game. So the thing that's the most important when it comes to alliance between marginalized and privileged parties is quite simply, does this actually benefit the marginalized party?

Unfortunately it isn't that common that it does.

Why is this? Because many allies are terrible, awful, incompetent allies. Terrible, awful, incompetent and under the privilege induced delusion that they are actually perfectly good allies, which just makes the problem persist. Part of the problem is certainly privilege, no doubts there. Privilege is the primary obfuscating curtain when it comes to knowing what those you act as an ally for need. But an even bigger part of the problem is actually the Liberal Reputation Points game itself and people's personal reputation.

Let's face it, no one wants to look like a bigot. It doesn't look good and we all firmly associate the word bigotry with being a grade A fuckstupid douchenozzle (or an equivalent horribly insulting phrase in your mind). It gets especially worse when you're in a pretty seriously marginalized group yourself and have to deal with other people being shitty allies. You would feel like complete guilty shit if you suddenly realized that you just fucked over someone in the exact same way you get fucked over regularly. It's why GLB folk and womanists respond so badly to being called on transphobia and cissexism. Because GLB folk have to contend with being betrayed by a mess of the lib community and womanists get regularly fucked over by white feminists and our resoundingly loud White Noise. So realizing that, hey, you've suddenly become a giant raging hypocrite is not a pleasant experience.

I've watched this unfold before. An ally does something not terribly beneficial or slips on something, is called on it and just completely flips out. And then a little bit later, contritely goes, "aw fuck, I'm so sorry, that was horrible of me". Some don't come to the realization of course, and they are pretty much considered dirty self deluding liars when they call themselves an ally. There's a list of things that consistently are done that reduce the effectiveness of one's alliance to folk and then are done that worsen the blow and add insult to injury. And there are things every ally can do to reduce the impact of their fuckups and to reduce the frequency of said fuckups. Let's take a look shall we?

The Don'ts:

1: Speaking for the marginalized person:

A lot of allies think they know a whole bunch of shit about what we need and how we need it. Well, they're wrong. You can do all the research in the world and you still won't know exactly what a given trans person will need. Fuck, most of us don't know what the rest of us need half the time. So when you speak over trans folk, or Aspects forbid, tell trans folk to shut up because you know what we need, you are being a shit poor ally. When a marginalized person tells you to relay a message, relay it exactly. Ask them at any chance you can to make sure you are not distorting, embellishing or extending their requests/needs verbally. You will make mistakes obviously, but if you do these things those mistakes will be less likely and have less impact.

2: Arguing a privilege call:

Face it, you do have privilege. This is a given. If you did something and someone calls privilege on you for it, don't argue it. Because chances are, you are wrong and if you argued it, you're making it just that much harder to get through to you to someone who goes through a helluva lot of shit normally and doesn't need it from allies too. There are rare cases where people will pull a privilege call out of their asses. This does happen and I would be a moron to claim otherwise. But it is extraordinarily rare. It is also generally fairly obvious to other folk that are part of the marginalized group when someone is

bullshitting a privilege call. Instead of arguing, ask how what you did was privilege induced. Ask nicely, ask politely. You have the burden as the privileged one, to operate beneficially to us. After all, life gives you a massive leg up and fucks us over. It isn't a huge deal to swallow your pride a little and politely ask what you did wrong. If the claim is bullshit, the person won't be able to describe what you did wrong in terms of privilege and other folk of that group will probably call them on it too.

But chances are, they aren't wrong and you fucked up.

3: Silencing:

This is never acceptable. Enabling others in engaging in silencing, engaging in silencing tactics yourself and not addressing others use of silencing are all unacceptable actions by an ally. Silencing tactics are fairly simple. They are methods used to quash dissent. To dismiss or disable the voices of dissent against the privilege induced majority speak. They can include trolling someone, threatening someone, making offensive jokes, using slurs, acting violent or intimidating, demanding or even criticizing anger from a marginalized person, demanding that a marginalized person change their methods for addressing privilege and a host of other things that are design to control the means of communication and discourse. Technically I often classifies as silencing, but as it doesn't always fit silencing, I separated them.

4: Prioritizing your reputation or being right over being a good ally:

Intellectuals hate being wrong. I know this, I'm the same way. Many folks will get defensive when called out as wrong or biased. This defensiveness is simply a defense of their reputation for accuracy or in general. But in the end, one's reputation for being right a lot is never as important as the life, well being and safety of the marginalized people that person is an ally for. When you prioritize these unimportant things over our bodies, lives, well beings and safety, you fail in being an ally. Such an action is pretty heinous because of how dehumanizing it is to be prioritized below something as ephemeral, largely unimportant and dynamic as reputation.

5: Engaging in actions known by the marginalized group to be marginalizing: This one is simple. Don't do the shit to us that we ask everyone to avoid doing to us, with your support as an ally. Seriously, this one is the one that really requires stupidity or asinine levels of apathy about us. If you're fighting other people doing something to us, DON'T DO IT TOO.

The Do's

1: Ask Questions:

Ask what's up often. You are at a loss when it comes to what we need maybe 80% of the time, if you're lucky. The more often you ask before or as you do something, the more likely you can catch yourself before you truly fuck up as an ally. When I write something about a group I am not a part of, I ask people to smack me with a correction if I'm being privileged or inaccurate. Requesting this shows good faith. You're trying and even if you make a mistake, the door is open to address it without fear of silencing. You are admitting your lack and your burden and this is always good.

2: Address things everywhere:

Even if we're not there to see you do it, fight oppression everywhere you can. Take the things we've requested of you and fight for them even when we aren't there. It shows that you actually give a shit about real change and not just about looking good for the Liberal Reputation Points game. And for

every person you change the mind of, that's another person who doesn't do something shitty to one of us. Real massive effects.

3: Self Analyze:

Privilege is, like I said above, nasty. It is sneaky, it is quiet, it is powerful. You will have a hard as hell time seeing past that stained glass window to the horrible shit beyond. I know I do. You have a burden due to that privilege, to do everything you can to see past it. The best way to do this (besides listening) is self analysis. Look at the things in your life that you have and compare that to the things marginalized groups have. Try to think in depth on it. Analyze and extend what we've taught you and try to find the points at which your privilege has truly given you immense advantages. And do these exercises in a way that will remind you. Publicly, on paper, on a blog, in a journal, somewhere. If it's just up in your head, you may forget or not accept it. But if you read what you just wrote, it will drive it home. And nothing seems to convince privileged folk better that they have privilege than another privileged person pointing it out. Which is an element of privilege in and of itself. XD

4: Keep your priorities ordered well:

Don't play the Liberal Reputation Points game. Just don't. Don't elevate your reputation or your sense of rightness. Don't elevate your hurt feelings that I spoke to you with anger above the people who are suffering because of people with your privilege. In the end, as an ally, your priority is our well being. The only thing that comes above that is your own well being (and as I said, you don't cost yourself a whole lot if anything by helping us). A few feelings being bruised cuz someone told you to fuck off is a whole lot less than being triggered by a rape joke. Know that we're more important than how you look, or how funny you think your jokes are, or whether or not you really liked that book, no matter how racist. And in the end, your first amendment rights are important but fuck are you a bad ally if you champion your right to use slurs about us in common conversation over helping us protect ourselves from being triggered and verbally abused by those same slurs.

5: Trust Us:

In the end, some of the things we say are gonna seem outlandish. Your privilege makes it tough to see the truth of the matter. It's like the matrix. You can't see past it but if you ever get that skill it is mind blowing and hard to believe. You need to learn to trust us to report our experiences and not question everything given to you. Because we get that enough from the non allies. We need you to make it easy for once.

So that is the list. Do's and Don'ts. There's more things, most likely, that I forgot or didn't add. But these are the big ones. Applicable to every single marginalized group and their allies. There are no exceptions to this list. You fail at being an ally if you are not doing these things. So if you are failing, stand up, dust off and do the right thing. Because we need you. It isn't just a pixelated base on a video game we're losing.

It's our lives.

Cross posted from recursiveparadox

Suggested citation

Marti Abernathey. "How To Be An Ally." TransAdvocate, September 12, 2009.
https://www.transadvocate.com/how-to-be-an-ally_n_1395.htm