11 Anti-Racist Actions You Can Take at Work—Today and Every Day

The killings of Black people in cities across America—including most recently [George Floyd](https://www.vox.com/identities/2020/6/4/21276674/protests-george-floyd-arbery-nationwide-trump), [Breonna Taylor](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/03/no-knock-warrant-breonna-taylor-was-illegal/), [Tony McDade](https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/tony-mcdade-shooting-death-tallahassee-1008433/), and [Ahmaud Arbery](https://www.nytimes.com/article/ahmaud-arbery-shooting-georgia.html)—have sparked widespread civil unrest. Protesters all over the country are taking to the streets to demand justice for them and for all Black people.

The protests and riots have also prompted a lot more non-Black folks to confront how harmful and insidious structural racism is and to consider how it has benefitted them in ways large and small. That may be you. And you might be wondering how you can be a better ally to Black and brown people in an environment where you spend a whole lot of time: work.

Here are 11 practical actions you can take to be an ally to people of color at your job.

1. First, Look Inward

As protests over George Floyd’s killing erupted, Actress Lea Michele [issued](https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/03/entertainment/lea-michele-glee-samantha-marie-ware/index.html) a standard celebrity tweet condemning systemic racism and police brutality, capped off with the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter.” But her former *Glee* co-star Samantha Marie Ware countered that her Black life didn’t seem to matter when they were on set, because Michele made her life a “living hell.” What followed were a few other Black *Glee* co-stars, including Amber Riley, chiming in and insinuating that Ware’s experience was not isolated, or at least hadn’t gone unnoticed. Michele later [came fairly close](https://www.instagram.com/p/CA-HatxlQ6h/?utm_source=ig_embed)to apologizing, but it’s clear she was unaware that her previous words and actions, according to Ware, would make her appear hypocritical.

So before you start on your crusade to make your workplace a more inclusive place, it’s probably a great idea to think critically about yourself. Have you benefited from your own racial identity or privilege in some way at work? Who is in your circle of trusted colleagues? When you talk to your Black colleagues or other people of color in your workplace, do you only talk to them about race stuff? Why is it that you’re constantly mixing up the names of the two Black women in the office? And do you tend to “sister-girl” them into awkward oblivion whenever you talk to them? Why are you sending them articles about fried chicken and natural hair (yes, I had a colleague who did this)?

Introspection is only a preliminary step. Once you evaluate your past actions, you’ll be able to think about the ones you’ll need to take to move forward.

2. Solicit Honest Feedback

If you feel comfortable doing so, ask a colleague you can trust, regardless of their race, to give you real feedback about things they’ve noticed about you, or ways you can be a better coworker to colleagues of color. And if they say, “Oh you’re fine,” your fact-finding mission is not over—there’s a possibility they’re not comfortable talking to you about these things, they just haven’t observed you doing something that raises a red flag, or they simply haven’t paid attention to these sorts of things before.

However, I’d caution you to tread lightly if you’re asking a Black person or person of color by accompanying your request with a guilt-free option not to respond. Allow for the possibility that they may say they’re not comfortable doing so, or just don’t have the energy. The task of educating white folks about how not to be racist should not constantly fall on their shoulders—it can be a relentless, thankless, and emotionally draining task. And to be frank, not all people of color are experts on dismantling racism.

Gathering this feedback can illuminate the things you don’t know and those you might need to learn more about.

3. Educate Yourself and Share Your Learnings

You don’t have to lean on Black people or other people of color for recommendations: You can seek guidance from other white people who have done this work already. Ask about which resources they’ve found to be insightful and the practical ways they’ve expressed allyship.

You can also just start with books; tons have been published about the institutional structures that prop up inequality and racism. Victoria Alexander, a PhD student at the University of Maryland [has a strong list of book recommendations](https://twitter.com/victoriaalxndr/status/1266829408268095493) for learning about Blackness and anti-racism. If you’re more of a visual learner, [British Vogue](https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/documentaries-about-race) and [Vulture](https://www.vulture.com/2020/06/12-documentaries-about-police-brutality-in-america.html) recommend a few key documentaries about race, inequality, and policing.

And then spread the knowledge. Being an ally is also about helping foster allyship in other people. This could come in the form of a reading list you share with your company, a book club for colleagues focused on understanding race and bias, or a meeting with coworkers to come up with concrete tasks to dismantle bias in your workplace.

4. Always Be Recruiting

Under its former Chief Talent Officer Patty McCord, Netflix instilled the mantra across the company that people should “Always Be Recruiting,” even when they’re not hiring managers or actively hiring. As she [told](https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/patty-mccord-always-be-recruiting.aspx) the Society for Human Resource Management in 2018, candidates can come from anywhere, and keeping an open mind about who might be great for the company can also mean seeing more people of color as good candidates for jobs.

The point being that so much of hiring is also networking—with an eye toward meeting and getting to know more people in your industry who don’t look like you. When you make a concerted effort to expand your network on an ongoing basis, whether you’re an entry-level assistant or a CEO, it can open up the pool of candidates who’ll come to mind and who you can recommend whenever there’s an opening.

5. They’re In the Door—Now Keep Them There

Hiring a bunch of people of color is just one step in making sure your workplace is taking steps toward enhancing its racial diversity. The next step is making sure those people feel safe coming to work each day, whether it’s about taking them seriously when they tell you someone on their team really doesn’t know how to hold back on the [microaggressions](https://www.vox.com/2015/2/16/8031073/what-are-microaggressions) or helping them find ways to grow in their careers.

This could mean advocating for [affinity groups](https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-to-start-an-employee-resource-affinity-group-in-the-workplace) (like an employee resource group) to meet and organize. It could mean creating or encouraging mentoring programs within the company to make sure it’s clear their careers can grow while they’re working there. If a formal mentoring program isn’t possible, a buddy program across the ranks between employees at different levels can help employees feel welcomed and supported.

6. Push Your Company to Ask Employees How It’s Doing

Companies can’t improve in all the ways they need to without feedback. Implementing tools to evaluate how workers experience their work lives, directly or through a survey, can help businesses delve into underlying issues that managers may not be able to see. Culture Amp, for example, is a surveying tool for employers to gather data from employees. With it, workers can agree or disagree with statements like, “My company believes that people can greatly improve their talents and abilities,” and, “I feel like I belong at [company].”

If you work on the people team or in the HR department at your company, you might be able to spearhead an effort to adopt one of these tools. But even if not, you could bring the suggestion to HR or leadership. Once a survey or other feedback is collected, managers can and should examine that data, broken down by demographics, to pick up on any worrisome patterns across different groups, and then seek solutions.

As Steven Huang, formerly the head of diversity and inclusion at Culture Amp [said](https://www.cultureamp.com/blog/5-diversity-and-inclusion-questions-to-use-at-your-company/), “Simply counting women and underrepresented minorities does not ensure you have an inclusive experience.” Asking those groups about their experiences at work and with their colleagues can explain why those employees may not feel welcome in their jobs and why they’re potentially eyeing the door.

7. Be Prepared to Report Illegal or Overt Discrimination

Admittedly, this step is difficult. Who enjoys dealing with conflict? But if you want to be an ally to your colleagues of color, it’s crucial.

Outright racial discrimination in the workplace is [prohibited](https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=97) by the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964. In most cases, you should report anything truly racist or biased (like a hiring manager passing over a candidate specifically because they’re Black, or someone using slurs about people of color) to your HR department, if your company has one. You can also help by acting as a witness if someone else is making a complaint, to reiterate what happened. In either case, you may want to talk to someone with a legal background about what you witnessed or experienced to understand the possible courses of action and what the process might look like.

8. Call Out Microaggressions

Then there are the more common microaggressions, which [are](https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Microaggressions+in+Everyday+Life%3A+Race%2C+Gender%2C+and+Sexual+Orientation-p-9780470491409) brief “indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group.” They are, for example, comments like, “You speak so well for a Black person,” or see above re: fried chicken.

These aren’t instances, necessarily, for someone to be fired, canceled, and shot out of a cannon, but over time these not-so-small acts add up to create a terrible working environment for your colleagues of color. In a [2019 Deloitte survey](https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/about-deloitte/inclusion-survey-research-the-bias-barrier.pdf) of employees at large companies, 64% said they experienced bias at work in the previous year—and 83% of those people said the bias was subtle, versus 32% who said it was blatant or obvious. When you consider that these subtle behaviors are more insidious and [can be at least as harmful](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0149206313506466#abstract)—and damaging for employee morale and retention—there’s a lot of room for change.

Professors Shamika Dalton and Michele Villagran [have a helpful checklist](https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/17431/19237) to guide both employees and managers through addressing a microaggression you hear or see, if you feel equipped and safe enough to do so. Overall, they advise you to avoid acting with anger, and to focus on the event, not the person. It’s important, however, not to pretend the incident didn’t happen, because it will only make things worse. (And it probably makes sense to document the incident and share it with a manager, HR, or keep it in your own records.)

9. Acknowledge (And Fix) Your Own Microaggressions

If someone says you used a microaggression, listen to them, and avoid immediately jumping to defend yourself or downplay what you said, as instinctual as it may be. Apologize but also recognize you can’t demand forgiveness. This is less about your hurt feelings and more about adjusting your behavior to do better next time.

10. Amplify Others

Sheree Atcheson, a computer scientist and head of diversity and inclusion at Monzo, [wrote for Forbes that](https://www.forbes.com/sites/shereeatcheson/2018/11/30/allyship-the-key-to-unlocking-the-power-of-diversity/#1c3eb36e49c6) one small act of allyship that can go a long way is using your privilege to boost the voices of marginalized people. Similarly, Meg Cramer, an audio producer, formerly of the beloved Black-women-hosted podcast *Another Round* (RIP), [documented](https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/anotherround/how-to-be-a-better-ally-an-open-letter-to-white-folks) how she displays her allyship as a white woman as a guide for others to use. Part of it was to listen to Black coworkers and boost what they have to say, either internally or externally.

This can be as straightforward as sharing the work of your Black colleagues on social media, echoing and boosting their ideas in meetings (with credit, of course), or helping them get face time with leaders in your company or industry that they may not have access to.

11. Understand Being An Ally Is an Ongoing Process

Perhaps the most exhausting thing about structural racism is knowing that it is so persistent, and so invasive. It’s everywhere, so it will take a lot of work to dismantle. This work is a marathon, not a sprint, so you have to train accordingly. It means constantly keeping your mind open to learning more and acknowledging you’ll do the wrong thing every once in a while. There’s no singular way to be an ally, either; that’s why it takes a critical eye inward and outward to figure out the best ways to rise to each occasion.

Not everyone can be perfect all the time, so give yourself some grace. As long as you know this, and make a concerted effort to help and understand others, your actions will speak volumes to your Black and brown colleagues.