University and College Union

Advocacy and Allyship: Working with Disabled workers

AUTUMN / WINTER 2021

The campaign for equality has been long fought for by and for disabled people with the support of allies who have used their platform to join the fight for disability equality.

Allyship for Disabled People

Themesa Neckles is currently the Vice-Chair of UCU's Disabled Members' Standing Committee (DMSC). Here, she writes about being a disability ally and its importance.

The disabled members standing committee recognises that, to grow and sustain our campaigns we would need to consider and develop understandings around "Allyship".

I briefly share with you, ideas around the concept of 'ally', thoughts on the nature of allyship, the use of language and what happens when allyship doesn't work and what radical allyship means. Finally, I will identify some practical steps to take for those of you who wish to work in solidarity with disabled or otherwise marginalised voices.

The roots of allyship can be found in several historical social justice struggles. From the movement for the abolition of slavery to women's suffrage, through to the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements of the 20th century. When we think of the word 'ally', we think of someone who publicly supports marginalised and underrepresented groups of people. We think of someone who is on 'our side' and 'has our back', but what does that really mean? Ally means to support (ally comes from the Latin word alligare, meaning "to bind to"). An ally is someone who supports those in which they have a common interest. Turning up to events, working on a one-to one basis with groups, wearing a lanyard or a t-shirt. At best, its Fighting for…

UCU continues to recognise and promote the term ally and I've come to understand that when allyship is used to discuss disability, it is not necessarily defined or identified by disabled people. As such, understandings of allyship become one-sided and oftentimes, the disabled person is positioned as a charity case, inferior or in some cases, their differences are assimilated rather than celebrated. Sometimes, people who call themselves allies are unintentionally doing more harm than good.

In terms of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion (or JEDI), allyship, unless it is active, is an empty buzzword and it seems like it takes more than support to make a difference to structural and systemic oppression. Non-disabled people claim to support JEDI principles, few, however, are courageous enough to put their own jobs on the line by speaking out against prejudice and discrimination in the workplace. Being an ally means being emotionally intelligent, modelling inclusion and being aware of not only one's own identity and privilege but also the intersectional identities of others. It is about supporting others even if your personal identity is not impacted by a specific challenge or is not called upon in a specific situation.

Recently, my colleague and friend who teaches extensively in area of equity in general, and race equity in particular, told me that she has moved away from referring to ally and talks instead about 'equity accomplices'. The original root of the word which comes from the Latin word complicare], speaks to a sense of community/relationship or "folding together," Additionally, in the language of social justice the focus of an accomplice is more on dismantling the structures that oppress that individual or group, and this work will be directed by the stakeholders in the marginalized group.

Those in power can stand with and not for marginalized populations.

Impact is therefore more important than intentions while most people have good intentions; they are allies and support the plight of disabled people in a way that is often comfortable to them. The impact of this type of allyship is not enough to disrupt ableism and work on achieving equity.

There are three key points to highlight that are fundamental to moving the work of the disabled community forward. Firstly, recognising the intersectional identities of individuals within the community. Secondly understanding that work which dismantles inequity involves community, relationship [dare I say it] love; and finally, that for change to occur we must first understand, and then take the steps necessary to dismantle the systemic [structural and

institutional] power structures of privilege and supremacy. Some ways to develop your accomplice skills:

To be an accomplice/active ally is to:

- Ensure that marginalised voices are heard in the workplace: if your branch doesn't include marginalised groups in their discussions are they fully committed to equality? It is important that all voices are represented in the workplace.

- Inclusion: Work toward a fairer more equitable workplace where under-represented groups are given opportunity to progress and succeed

- Identify and eliminate discriminatory practices: Policies and procedures are excellent hiding places for promoting discriminatory practices as many are written from the point of seeing everyone as belonging to the same homogenous group.

- Support: To promote understanding and mutual support, appreciation for everyone in the workplace

- To oppose Government populist positions: Many Government areas relating to work and inequality, e.g. the recent Sewell report into institutionalised racism from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities described as a "whitewash", has done more harm than good.

Radical allyship accomplices

In the Caribbean, we have a saying – charity begins at home. I think this is where our most potent form of accomplice-hood/active allyship can occur.

I once attended a meeting where the Chair announced just before the meeting that she was going to change the format and timings of the presentations. When I challenged this decision, citing my visual impairment which makes processing information at speed more difficult, I was told by the Chair not to worry, that I could just raise my hand if I needed to stop, that they were there to support me and that they were also disabled.

If we were to do a critical analysis of this situation there are a few issues:

- The denial/erasure of individual experience of disability.

- Derailing/instituting barriers to success in that situation; refusing to focus on the impact the situation will have on the individual

- Silencing an individual through tone policing

- Denying that the concerns they have can be fixed, blaming other factors

Did I miss anything? Do you recognise some of these behaviours in your own practice?

Allyship can and must emerge among disabled people as well as between disabled and non-disabled people. Within marginalised communities, we must recognise the other forms of oppression that may be acting alongside the shared characteristic. Research, as well as my own lived experience shows, that we need to consider racial and ethnic minority forms of discrimination as intersectional, inseparable, and unique because I am a woman of African descent with a disability; thus, the forms of discrimination I would face would be different to a white, female colleague with a disability. This the space that is formed between us, can be a site for some radical accomplice work.

Does anyone remember the movie *See no Evil, Hear no Evil*? Where two disabled men were independently floundering, oppressed, disadvantaged… but when they worked together, they were able to fight for justice literally and figuratively. That is radical allyship. Finding, developing relationship and rapport, arguing, but ultimately working together, working in solidarity to achieve change. Thus, within the disabled community, what do we need to do to develop and recognize this? Some of the ways forward I would suggest would be to.

- Know yourself – your own strengths and blind spots.

- Create principled spaces for disabled and non-disabled people to have conversations about:

    - anything [move beyond the transactional]

    - how to courageously fight for marginalised communities. Generate actionable ideas and strategies for building a psychologically safe community, particularly for those facing the greatest oppression and suffering with the disabled community (such as but not limited to LGBTQIA+, the elderly, black people, people living in poverty).

- Get practical stories, inspiration and tools to begin the journey of change.

- Evolve, be open to challenge and change. I suppose that's why we are witnessing the race equity groups beginning to move away from the use of the term 'ally' and towards 'accomplice'; perhaps that's why some disability and inclusion groups have begun to use the phrase "radical disability allyship" as a way of dismantling ableism.

This year, our disability campaign took on an intersectional approach to tackling the barriers and challenges disabled people face at work and included, but was not limited to the impact on careers, mental and physical health and well-being, accessing reasonable adjustments at work, making workplaces accessible, ensuring those who need to continue to work from home can do so, and where this was not possible, to be able to access disability leave. To be a radical ally, means ensuring that you place inclusion at the heart of what you do, that you are a 'threat to inequity' (Gorski) in whatever form it presents itself; you use your voice, and your structurally enabled advantages to fight discrimination and oppression. Being an ally applies to all marginalised groups and no one group / community has a monopoly on allyship.

Performative allyship simply means talking the talk, but not walking the walk. It is when someone from a non-marginalised group professes support and solidarity with a marginalised group in a way that either is not helpful or that actively harms that group. Performative allyship usually involves the "ally" centring their work on self, to gain a 'reward' or some sort of accolade. For example, virtue signalling on social media, and winning followers or being given a platform for being a "good person" or "on the right side." In the workplace it could take on different forms by employers e.g. superficial policies; or using equality schemes such as stonewall champion; Athena Swan; or the race equality charter as brand management rather than agents for change. Here are some performative detours – and suggestions about how to reroute.

- **Listening to seminars on disability instead of listening to disabled people:** Training and education is important for everyone to understand how different groups are marginalised and what can be done to improve situations and conditions. For instance, the use of language and terminology, understanding the barriers and challenges faced by disabled people regarding accessibility and reasonable adjustments. This is helpful for non-disabled people, however, to fully understand the issues facing us at work and how challenges and

barriers can be removed it is important to speak with us directly and to respect our views.

- **Reinventing the wheel:** Disabled people and Disabled people's organisations have made tremendous gains in achieving disability equality, and yes, there is more that needs to be done, however, we do not need non-disabled people 'jumping on the bandwagon' to organise, speak for us. The charity model of disability has no place here, likewise, ableism! What we need are allies not individuals who are using us for their own personal gain or as Harry Potter, ready to wave a magic wand!

- **Changing the narrative:** Society is entrenched in ableism and view us through the lens of the medical model of disability. This needs to change. We have mentioned the importance for disability allies educating themselves, speaking with us, and not reinventing the wheel or treating us as weak. We would welcome allies to help change narratives that seek to discriminate against us. Furthermore, in the workplace, we would highly recommend employers adopt the social model of disability and engage more directly with us.

- **Using disabled people as your own inspiration to rise above challenges:** We have all seen those widely shared Facebook posts that are amazed at people who "overcame" their disability or impairments — the girl drawing with her mouth because she does not have arms.

  This is one of the images which are meant to inspire non-disabled people to see their own challenges are not so bad after all. These images and messages often come at the expense of disabled groups by objectifying one group of people for the benefit of another.

- **View aids that enhance the lives of disabled people as more than just devices:** Some disabled people require the assistance of wheelchairs, service animals, interpreters and other devices that help enhance their quality of life. These objects act as an extension of a person — and it is important to respect them as a part of that person. Have you ever seen a person leaning on someone's wheelchair? That's because they are not aware that the wheelchair is part of that person's personal space and that doing so is like standing in someone's shoes. It is their personal belonging.

- **Understand a person's disability doesn't define them but may be an important part of their identity:** Changing your language to refer to people first is an important step toward inclusivity. Instead of using a person's identity as her defining characteristic, refer to their disability only when necessary to the conversation. "Is the meeting space accessible? My co-worker, Themesa, is coming to the meeting and she uses a wheelchair." Most importantly, talk to us about what our disability means to us. It could be our connections to community and activism, or it could be relatively unimportant. But talking to us is the only way you will know. Let us define ourselves on our own terms.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with some statements about what being an ally means to disabled people: It means:

- Taking on the struggle as your own

- Transferring the benefits of your privilege to those who lack it

- Not taking away any autonomy from disabled people

- Amplifying voices of oppressed groups before your own

- Acknowledging that even though you feel pain, the conversation is not about you

- Not using your power, position or privilege to make decisions for disabled people

- Not silencing the voices and lived experiences of disabled people

- Not applying the medical or charity model of disability

- Understanding that your education is up to you and no one else

- Listening and self-reflecting

- Using everyday language appropriately

If you want to be a disability ally, do your homework, and resolve to fight with, and not for disabled people.