ALLYSHIP & REPRESENTATION

The Power of Visibility & Giving a Voice

PhoenixRize CONSULTING
Unlocking the value of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Allyship is one of the DEI concepts that sounds and seems very simple in the beginning, but is actually challenging to perfect. We all tend to think we are allies to an extent - since we are not racist or homophobic, it makes us some kind of allies to marginalised groups. In reality, this only makes us a passive bystander in the systemic discrimination and everyday struggles that underrepresented groups have. Real allyship is built through introspection, active advocacy and intervention - all which might seem scary concepts so start with. Allyship is the single greatest tool to build an inclusive community or organisation, and allows us to create products and results that are received well due to their authenticity. When we start to consider allyship as the responsibility of the organisation, we are able to dodge the biggest pitfalls of the DEI field.

It is through allyship that we are able to promote real representation which is conceptualised as a dialogue rather than a number or a quota. In this article, we dive deeper into allyship and its challenges and discuss what it means to take representation to an advanced level.

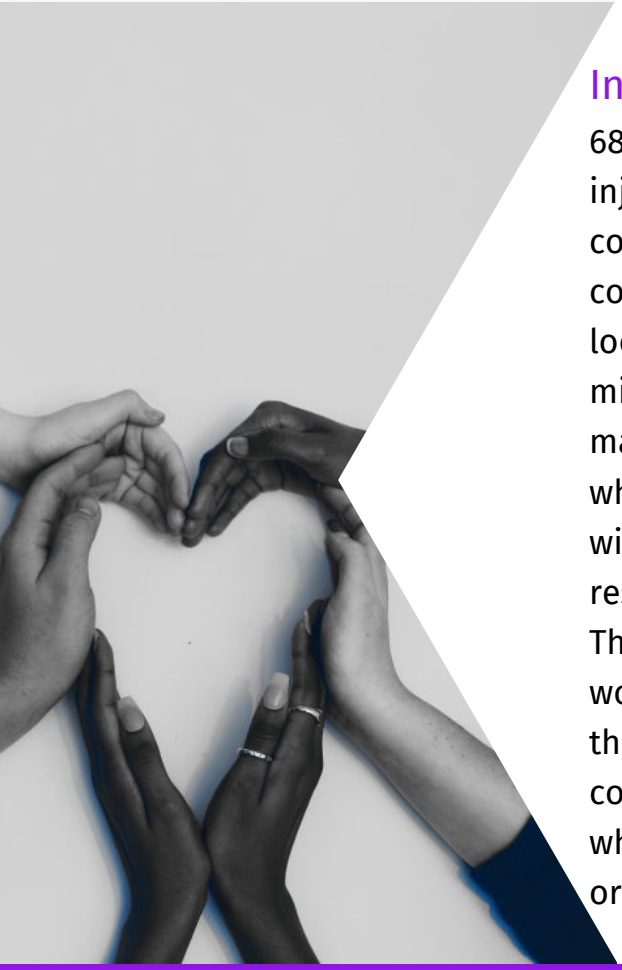
Challenging concepts of allyship

Being an active advocate, speaking up and supporting our underrepresented colleagues is really an impactful way of being an ally that actually makes a difference. The numbers speak for themselves: while 82% percent of white men and women consider themselves as allies, only 45% percent of Black women feel that they have allies at the workplace1. This disconnect of perceptions is what helps to paint a picture of why allyship needs to be palpable: a passive allyship does not make a change and is simply fairly useless. Unless it is explicitly known that one's leader or colleague is an ally, whatever they think of themselves in regards to allyship makes little change. This is why it is crucial to take the expectations of allyship in an organisational setting to the next level - to foster and cultivate an understanding of allyship that is rooted in advocacy and active partaking, as well as deep learning and listening. When the organisation defines and approaches allyship from an authentic foundation of supporting underrepresented groups and communities, it sets the example and leaves little space for misunderstandings and passivity.

Allyship as Deep Introspection

Why allyship can be so challenging to many is because it makes us face our own situatedness and privilege. It requires us to acknowledge that we have gotten more and had it easier due to our privilege in some aspect of life, whether it is gender, race, disability or sexual orientation. We as humans do not want to give up what we already have, in fact, it is easier for us to refuse something beforehand than to give up what we have, whether it is a pen or a career opportunity. It is the challenge of equity, but also that of allyship - giving up things for others' profit requires a mindful action, rather than something that comes naturally.
Privilege also plays a role in speaking up: while 36% of Black women got repercussions for speaking up against racism, the corresponding number for white women is only 10%1. It means that as allies, we should use the safety of our privilege to challenge and speak up about topics of discrimination.

During our careers we have always been encouraged to be selfish, to put our own benefit first and take all the opportunities that arise, whether they are to speak up or a chance for a promotion. Allyship is about reversing a lot of this learned behaviour - a key for allyship is to decenter yourself from the conversation. This includes giving space for others to speak, promoting underrepresented or marginalised groups and colleagues for opportunities.



Inclusion through Allyship

68% of people of colour are on guard against racist bias or injustice at work 2. It means that over two thirds of people of colour do not feel comfortable, safe and included with their colleagues and leaders, and might alter the way they speak, look or behave due to the possible biases and microaggressions. According to the same study, this was mainly mitigated through two factors: allyship and curiosity, which go hand in hand: through being open-minded and willing to learn, we also cultivate better understanding and resources to combat these biases and discrimination. Through being good allies, we create a more comfortable workplace for all, where they don't need to be bracing themselves against possible attacks from their closest colleagues. It contributes to increased inclusion, through which the employee of colour is more likely to stay in the organisation.

"Onlyness" is a phenomenon that ails a lot of organisations who are in the beginning of their DEI journey. When we start to promote our "firsts", such as first woman of colour in the board or first openly trans director, they often face challenges of being the "only" of their identity in the group, and struggle to have their voice and ideas heard. Through active allyship, we can mitigate onlyness: while we might not identify the same as them, we can amplify their voices and ensure that they feel included in the team. This makes allyship the key to sustainable representation and in developing a new demographic.

Representation as a Dialogue

To us at PhoenixRize, representation is not just ticking off different demographics off the list and how the people who work for you look like. Rather, it is how well the organisation represents the individuals: how well are they represented in the board, how well does the organisation understand the systemic barriers and discrimination the individual or group is facing. Representation, rather than being quantitative, becomes qualitative - it becomes something reflected in the values, policies and processes taking place at the organisation. That's why we think that to grasp what we actually mean with diversity, we should refer to representation: rather than being a quantitative number, it is a qualitative dialogue of the organisation's relation to their workforce, students or employees.

When we lean towards representation rather than diversity, it becomes possible for us to avoid the general DEI pitfalls that lead to tokenism and performative allyship. When we see the relation with representation as a two-way deal, rather than the employee being a representative of their identity group, we see changes in how we deal with external stakeholders, internal structures and policies. Representation becomes how well is this person and their specific histories, experiences and hurdles represented in the organisation's practice, communication and policies, rather than are all ethnicities represented in the organisation. This enables the organisation to be an ally for their employees, students, customers and clients, rather than starting allyship from an individual level.

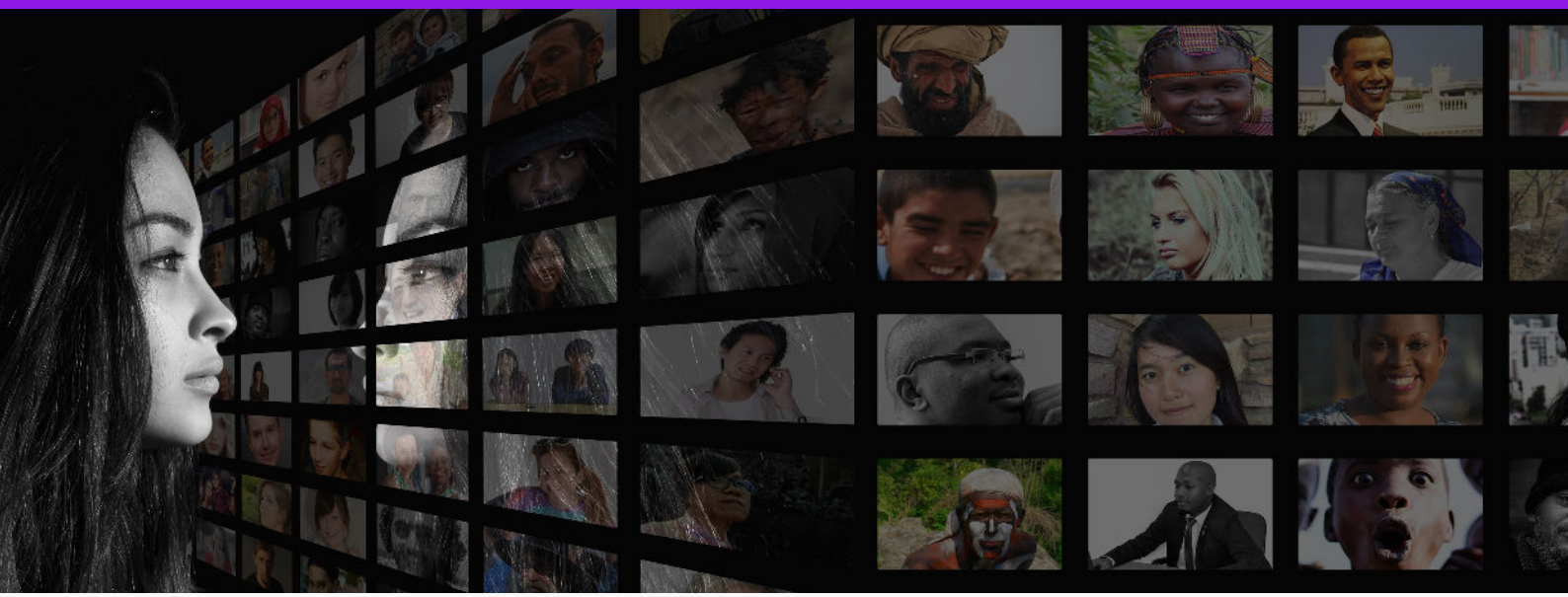
Through contextualising representation as a dialogue and as a responsibility, we create sustainability and authenticity in every step of the organisation. This means that whether it is creating new policies for parents in the workplace, or a character in a series, we ensure that it is rooted in understanding of the specific issues, histories and experiences that the people face, rather than falling to a disconnect from reality. This disconnect, a form of tokenism, is really the meaning of one-sided representation: something done for a quota, a legislation or to please a certain audience, and it falls flat due the lack of real understanding. They are the kind of decisions that end up getting called out by the wider public, exactly because they are done without regard or consultation to the people portrayed or affected by the decisions.

Conclusion

Allyship and representation tie together in situations where underrepresented groups are still minorities - where their rights, voices and ideas do not get equally heard. Through mobilising an active form of allyship, allies support and promoting their marginalised colleagues, students and employees, thus contributing to higher levels of representation.

Being an active ally is a complicated and challenging role to take, and can sometimes feel uncomfortable or even scary. Having conversations that you aren't used to or confronting people who might be higher up on the ladder takes courage and can be a source of anxiety. Even if we understand the need for advocacy and our role as an ally, stepping up can seem like a huge barrier and feed our insecurities. This is why we design bespoke courses to give you the tools and confidence required to start with allyship and create a more inclusive workplace.

Sign up for any of our courses or get in contact with us to take the representation in your organisation to the advanced level through mobilising real allyship and dialogue.



Adaku Ezeudo is an award-winning expert in the area of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). The founder of boutique consultancy firm, PhoenixRize, she is a facilitator, educator and speaker who is on a mission to equip companies and organisations with the skills and know-how to empower their diverse teams to perform at their best. Her work helps organisations to become aware of the concepts relating to DEI, develop and sustain successful DEI strategies and implement anti-discriminatory and inclusive policies, fulfilling their statutory equality and diversity requirements, while shaping diversity into a strategic advantage. With Master's degrees in both business administration and development studies, in addition to a post graduate certificate in the area of Women, Gender & Social Justice, Adaku is uniquely positioned to merge business objectives with those of diversity, equity and inclusion. She has particular expertise in the area of intercultural relations, race relations and intersectionality and is passionate about helping leaders to develop their inclusive leadership skills for the benefit of their teams and organisations.

Research mentioned in the article

1https://leanin.org/research/allyship-at-work

https://www.catalyst.org/reports/allyship-curiosity-employees-of-color/

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