
I WOULD BE A PERFECT ALLY IF...

We learn many excuses and justifications for racism in this society. We also learn many tactics for avoiding responsibility for it. We have developed a coded language to help us avoid even talking about it directly. Our training makes it easy to find reasons for not being allies to people of color. In order to maintain our commitment to being allies, we must reject the constant temptations to find excuses for being inactive.

What reasons have you used for not taking a stronger stand against racism, or for backing away from supporting a person of color?

Following are some of the reasons I've recently heard white people use. I call them "if only" statements because that's the phrase they usually begin with. Our real meaning is just the reverse. We are often setting conditions on our commitment to racial justice. We are saying that "only if" people of color do this or that will we do our part. These conditions let us blame people of color for our not being reliable allies.

"I would be a committed and effective ally...

- if only people of color weren't so angry, sensitive, impatient, or demanding;
- if only people of color realized that I am different from other white people. I didn't own slaves; I treat everyone the same; I don't see color; I'm not a member of the KKK and I've even been to an unlearning racism workshop;
- if only people of color would give white people a chance, hear our side of things and realize that we have it hard too;
- if only people of color didn't use phrases like "all white people;"
- if only people of color didn't expect the government to do everything for them and wouldn't ask for special treatment."

Being a white ally to people of color means to be there all the time, for the long term, committed and active. Because this is hard, challenging work, we often look for ways to justify not doing it. Rather than finding ways to avoid being allies, we need to look at what gets in our way. Where does it get hard? Where do we get stuck? Many of the reasons listed above are ways to justify withdrawal from the struggle against racism.

Another way we justify our withdrawal is to find a person of color who represents, in our minds, the reason why people of color don't really deserve our support. Often these examples have to do with people of color not spending money or time the way we think they should. "I know a person who spends all her money on..."

We often set standards for their conduct that we haven't previously applied to white people in the same position. "Look what happened when so-and-so got into office." In most instances we are criticizing a person of color for not being perfect (by our standards), and then using that person as an example of an entire group of people.

People of color are not perfect. Within each community of color people are as diverse as white people, with all the human strengths and failings. The question is one of justice. No one should have to earn justice. We don't talk about taking away rights or opportunities from white people because we don't like them, or because they don't make the decisions we think they should. Even when white people break the law, are obviously incompetent for the position they hold, are mean, cruel or inept, it is often difficult to hold them accountable for their actions. Our laws call for equal treatment of everyone. We should apply the same standards and treatments to people of color as we do to white people.

Not only are people of color not perfect, neither are they representative of their race. Yet how many times have we said:

- “But I know a person of color who...”
- “A person of color told me that...”
- “So-and-so is a credit to her race...”
- (Turning to an individual) “What do people of color think about that...?”
- “Let’s ask so-and-so, he’s a person of color.”

We would never say that white person was representative of that race, even if that person were Babe Ruth, Mother Theresa, Hitler, John Lennon, or Margaret Thatcher, much less the only white person in the room. When was the last time you spoke as a representative for white people?

Imagine yourself in a room of fifty people where you were the only white person. At one point in the middle of a discussion about a major issue, the facilitator turns to you and says, “Could you please tell us what white people think about this issue?” How would you feel? What would you say? Would it make any difference if the facilitator said, “I know you can’t speak for other white people, but could you tell us what the white perspective is on this issue?” What support would you want from the other people around you in the room?

In that situation would you want a person of color to be your ally by interrupting the racial dynamic and pointing out that there isn’t just one white perspective, and you couldn’t represent white people? Would you want them to challenge the other people present and stand up for you? Being a white ally to people of color calls for the same kind of interventions – stepping in to support people of color when we see any kind of racism being played out.

BASIC TACTICS

Every situation is different and calls for critical thinking about how to make a difference. Taking the statement above into account, I have compiled some general guidelines:

- 1. Assume racism is everywhere, everyday.** Just as economics influences everything we do, just as our gender and gender politics influence everything we do, assume that racism is affecting whatever is going on. We assume this because it’s true, and because one of the privileges of being white is not having to see or deal with racism all the time. We have to learn to see the effect that racism has. Notice who speaks, what is said, how things are done and described. Notice who isn’t present. Notice code words for race, and the implications of the policies, patterns and comments that are being expressed. You already notice the skin color of everyone you meet and interact with – now notice what difference it makes.
- 2. Notice who is the center of attention and who is the center of power.** Racism works by directing violence and blame toward people of color and consolidating power and privilege for white people.
- 3. Notice how racism is denied, minimized and justified.**
- 4. Understand and learn from the history of whiteness and racism.** Notice how racism has changed over time and how it has subverted or resisted challenges. Study the tactics that have worked effectively against it.
- 5. Understand the connections between racism, economic issues, sexism and other forms of injustice.**
- 6. Take a stand against injustice.** Take risks. It is scary, difficult, risky and may bring

up many feelings, but ultimately it is the only healthy and moral human thing to do. Intervene in situations where racism is being passed on.

7. **Be strategic.** Decide what is important to challenge and what's not. Think about strategy in particular situations. Attack the source of power.
8. **Don't confuse a battle with the war.** Behind particular incidents and interactions are larger patterns. Racism is flexible and adaptable. There will be gains and losses in the struggle for justice and equality.
9. **Don't call names or be personally abusive.** Since power is often defined as power over others – the ability to abuse or control people – it is easy to become abusive ourselves. However, we usually end up abusing people who have less power than we do because it is less dangerous. Attacking people doesn't address the systemic nature of racism and inequality.
10. **Support the leadership of people of color.** Do this consistently, but not uncritically.
11. **Don't do it alone.** You will not end racism by yourself. We can do it if we work together. Build support, establish networks, work with already established groups.
12. **Talk with your children and other young people about racism.**

Reference: Ezorsky, Gertrude. *Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Paul Kivel. "How White People Can Serve as Allies to People of Color" in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism* by Paula S. Rothenberg; New York: Worth Publishers, 2002; pp. 132-135.

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