

How to Support People of Colour in the Workplace

1st June 2022

Many people are seeing the global conversation that has arisen out of protests against systemic racism in the United States and are asking what they can do to help. The good news is there are lots of ways to become an ally, and a key place that you can help is in the workplace, where people of colour can face not only invisible, systemic barriers but also direct acts of discrimination. Here are some of the ways you can start to change your organisation to offer support:

Speak up. Many people from ethnic minorities experience racism in a variety of forms, from the invisible to the overt. Some ways in which this manifests in the workplace are:

- bias—being passed up for promotions or being told their work isn't good enough
- microaggressions—small instances of indirect, subtle or even unintended incidents of racism
- racist abuse—slurs, insults, and physical violence

To be a good workplace ally, be aware of the fact that this is a common, everyday experience for your non-white colleagues. If you find other colleagues engaging in any kind of racism, it's important to let them know that it's unacceptable and follow your company's discrimination policy to report it.

Request company-wide bias and anti-racism training from your human resources (HR) department. Everyone has unconscious bias. We have to process millions of pieces of information per day, and we fall back on shortcuts to help us make decisions. However, sometimes the shortcuts are based on poor information or social learning. Learning how bias functions can help make the unconscious conscious—at which point, it can be acknowledged and dealt with.

Even if you receive training, you may still find yourself making mistakes. If that happens, acknowledge your mistake, apologise, and promise to be more aware next time.

Call for diversity. Despite being a multicultural country, recruitment discrimination persists. This suggests a lack of access and opportunity for non-whites. Talk to your manager and HR about implementing diversity policies, mentoring courses, open days, and outreach to create a more open, safe environment that encourages people of colour to both join and

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progress in your organisation.

Create a diversity action council within your organisation. Create a mission statement for this group, which is reflective of the needs of your organisation, be it to promote ongoing training, education or awareness about issues that impact your team. An active group can serve a vital role in communicating the needs of staff directly to leadership, when employees may feel invisible or unheard.

Encourage objective selection processes. Studies have found that CVs with non-Anglo sounding names tend to get rejected at a higher rate than those with white-sounding names—even when it's the same CV. Minimise unconscious bias by introducing anonymised selection processes for hiring. Propose scorecards so that all candidates are rated against the same criteria by multiple people throughout the recruitment process rather than relying on the “feeling” of the recruitment manager.

Give credit, both casually and formally. Studies have shown that black women's comments are forgotten more quickly and remembered less accurately than those in other demographics. This has left many black women reporting that they feel invisible at work. One way you can help counteract this is to give credit and praise for ideas, innovations, and good work. If you notice someone else taking credit or erasing the contribution of a person of colour on your team, say, “Let's not forget, that was Annie's great idea.” You can also help by ensuring that outstanding achievers are nominated for any company or industry awards.

Mentor junior members of your organisation. People who are aware of the difficulties people of colour can face in the workplace can help champion their colleagues by offering to mentor or sponsor new recruits so they know they have an ally. This will also give them someone who'll speak up for them when it comes time to consider promotions and pay raises. You could also suggest a formal mentorship course to your HR department.

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