

# S.P.A.R.K.

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/http://spark4community.com/>)

## WHY I DON'T CALL MYSELF AN "ALLY"

By spark4community (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/http://spark4community.com/author/spark4community/>) | July 24, 2017

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT, FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

"What would be helpful in this moment?" I asked my friend, who's African American, as we sat on the couch one evening after work.

My friend had just shared a frustrating experience she had involving cross-race dynamics at work with a senior executive who happened to be a white woman.

"I appreciate you asking." She said. "I think I'm just frustrated and need to keep processing," her hand cupped the top of her forehead as she breathed a deep sigh.

"That makes sense. Take your time. And feel free to share more when you're ready."

*What followed were her reflections on an exchange that made my blood boil.*

*Basically a senior colleague called her in the middle of the day –with no warning or request for time in her calendar– and gave her "feedback", basically scolding and schooling her on the importance of timeliness.*

"She did what?! But you had an emergency and communicated with all the right people about why you were late! I don't understand what was going through her brain," I exclaimed.

Sigh.

"Oh, trust me, I know. And this is my reality, Rachel," she said.

"I face encounters like this (where a white person crosses a boundary, giving me advice, making me feel frustrated) **every. single. day.** I'm exhausted. People feel as though my time and space is theirs to intrude on. I'm tired. Tired of explaining. Tired of justifying. As the only black executive on my team, I feel like I can't get angry or show emotion, because not only am I representing the one African American perspective but also it feels like all cards are stacked against me. If I'm the 'angry Black woman, it's over'"

Sigh.

"Is there anyone who sees what you see?" I said.

"No. I feel as though I have no allies on my team, and it's very difficult to say the least."

Sigh.

"So, what would be helpful in this moment?"

"You know what gets me? The fact that some of the individuals I've referenced have "Black Lives Matter" posters / bumper stickers / signs in their yards. When they're coupled with micro-aggressions, the signs mean nothing."

*What followed was a long conversation about why it's imperative that white people reflect on their layers of privilege and better understand what ally-ship truly is. I made a commitment to do more (say more, share more, and listen more) at the end of our conversation.*

**And that's why I'm writing this piece.**

I hear stories like this every week, and I feel responsible for speaking up.

Now, let me start by saying I'm a white, queer woman who walks through the world with blankets of privilege because of the color of my skin. I've dedicated the last few years to doing my own racial identity development work, and I'm still a work-in-progress. **I'll never consider myself an expert, because I'll ALWAYS have more to learn.**

I'll also say that this topic is very close to my heart, because the love of my life is an African American woman, which means I have first-hand experience navigating the complexities of this particular conversation.

On the professional front, as a racial equity facilitator and leadership coach, I hear the term "ally" get used, misused, understood, and misunderstood all the time...so I feel called to share some reflections.

I'd also like to note that most of my examples pertain to race and the LGBTQ community because that's what I'm most present and proximate to; that said, what follows can be applied to other marginalized and vulnerable communities, and I welcome your feedback. I aspire to be experienced as an ally to the communities who need/want alliance and solidarity.

Okay, let's begin, shall we?

**Here's *one* representation of a dynamic that is sadly commonplace in conversations about "allyship":**



### Sound/look familiar?

Over the years doing this work, I've seen people get upset and frustrated, I've seen feelings get hurt and intentions misunderstood...and I've experienced those things first-hand as well.

So, I dedicated the past eleven years to figuring out what it truly means to be experienced in **alliance** by colleagues/friends who need or desire solidarity because they are in a vulnerable or marginalized position. And I'll continue to dedicate my work to this as I continue to learn and grow as a leader.

**I question I often ask myself (and others) is this: what does it really mean to be experienced as an ally?**

Since I started following Kayla Reed (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/https://www.safetypinbox.com/kayla-reed/>) last year, I immediately resonated with her description of "ally" behaviors in this tweet (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/https://twitter.com/ikaylareed/status/742243143030972416?lang=en>). She broke it down with this acronym:

A - ALWAYS CENTER ON THE IMPACTED

L - LISTEN AND LEARN FROM THE OPPRESSED

L - LEVERAGE YOUR PRIVILEGE

Y - YIELD THE FLOOR

Kayla Reed is brilliant, and I feel grateful for her leadership, geniusness, and presence moving the racial justice conversation forward in powerful ways.

Also, in this Guide to Allyship (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/http://www.guidetoallyship.com/>), the authors share:

*"The best definition of an ally comes from Roxane Gay (author of Bad Feminist) in her article for Marie Claire, "On Making Black Lives Matter." (https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/http://www.marieclaire.com/culture/features/a21423/roxane-gay-philando-castile-alton-sterling/) In it, she notes:*

*Black people do not need allies. We need people to stand up and take on the problems borne of oppression as their own, without remove or distance. We need people to do this even if they cannot fully understand what it's like to be oppressed for their race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, class, religion, or other marker of identity. We need people to use common sense to figure out how to participate in social justice.*

*To recap: Being an ally doesn't necessarily that you 100% understand what it feels like to be oppressed. It means you are taking on the struggle as your own.*

*A marginalized individual cannot easily cast away the weight of their identity through oppression on a whim. They must carry that weight every single day, for better or for worst. An ally understands that this is a weight that they too must be willing to carry and never put down.*

So what do we do? Where do we start?

I'll start by sharing why I don't use the term ally in reference to myself:

SIMPLY PUT, BECAUSE IT'S NOT A LABEL I GET TO CLAIM, AS A WHITE WOMAN.

I may work tirelessly to show solidarity and be in alliance with friends and family who are more vulnerable to discriminatory stereotypes, threats, and unfair treatment; however, only the person on the other side (the one I'm showing up for) gets to choose how they describe me.

If someone in a marginalized community chooses to describe me as an ally, then I consider that a deep honor. But I don't get to project what I want. That's acting with amplified privileges.

To provide a simple comparison, I work and hope to be experienced as a good listener with my friends, family, and my partner –but only they know what it feels like to be listened to by me. Only they can say "Rachel's a good listener"...because only they know what it feels like to be heard by me.

Make sense?

So, rather than tell YOU what to do (which I often struggle with as a reader)...I'll choose to be vulnerable and hold up the mirror.

If I could go back and give advice to myself 10 years ago, here are some reflections I'd share on each of the letters Kayla Reed outlines:

A - ALWAYS CENTER ON THE IMPACTED



## 1. TO ME THIS MEANS DON'T MAKE IT ABOUT ME.

If and when my mind starts to make connections and/or I want to share resources or be of help, it's important to pause and bring my attention back to those in the most vulnerable position. Regardless of how much I want to help or how much I think I can offer, it's not about me. I must focus on what I'm hearing and learning.

## L -LISTEN AND LEARN FROM THE OPPRESSED



## 2. TO TRULY LISTEN MEANS TO PAY ATTENTION, WITH MY EARS, EYES, HEART, AND MIND.

To me, being a learner means showing curiosity—rather than certainty—about another person's experience. Regardless of how much I know or feel, they are the expert of their experience. It's imperative that I stay open-minded and do not make assumptions about someone else's experience.

I aspire to be someone who listens with empathy and curiosity—and that is not easy across racial difference. Listening beyond the words and tuning-in to body language allows us to sharpen our understanding and identify the best ways to navigate a given conversation though. We don't always have to respond right away. If we need to keep listening for increased understanding, the two words "say more" open the door and give us time to process what we're hearing.

*"When you really listen to another person from their point of view, and reflect back to them that understanding, it's like giving them emotional oxygen." – Stephen Covey*

## L -LEVERAGE YOUR PRIVILEGE



## 3. THIS IS THE ONE THAT INVOLVES MOST DISCERNMENT.

To me, this one is the essence of solidarity. Remember, no one needs "saving" or "helping". Us white folks often times see injustice and intuitively want to help. That doesn't mean it's okay. That can be experienced as condescending. The definition of **leverage**

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/https://www.google.com/search?q=definition+of+leverage&oq=definition+of+leverage&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l5.314j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>) is to "use (something) to maximum advantage".

In order to do that, I must have keen awareness of my privileges and what they afford me to do/have.

When it's appropriate, and when I have a seat at "the table" (and see someone doesn't), I can advocate for a seat to be added. If I have a platform, I should make sure honor the voices that need to be heard most. If I have access to resources, it's important to share them with those who need them most.

There's a reason why #1 & #2 are first. We need to be aware, intentional, and mindful when leveraging privilege. I need to reflect on how my identity impacts the opportunities I have available to me.

The importance of critical judgement can't be under-emphasized.

## Y -YIELD THE FLOOR



4. Y: TO ME, YIELDING THE FLOOR MEANS ALWAYS BEING MINDFUL OF WHOSE VOICES ARE IN THE ROOM AND CREATING SPACE FOR THOSE WHO NEED IT.

The opposite of this one is what's considered "mansplaining" or "whitesplaining". To yield, means to pause and wait, with mindfulness of my airtime.

Jamie Utt reminds us in this piece (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/11/things-allies-need-to-know/>) on Allyship, "part of the privilege of your identity is that you have a choice about whether or not to resist oppression."

Oppression is omnipresent. It's woven into the fabric of our country, so it's our responsibility to pay attention and notice what's at play, and then make sure there's space for underrepresented communities to be heard.

In relinquishing control and stepping back, it's our responsibility to allow space and time for others. If you've struggled with perfectionism or you like control, this one will be hard, but it's imperative that we sit with the discomfort and ambiguity.

Other voices need to be heard.

## 5. HERE'S A FINAL STEP I'D LIKE TO ADD FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION:



**Reflect and loop back:** check back in with the person/community after the exchange. A full-circle moment with my friend looked like this:

*"Thank you for sharing what you shared. Truly. I can't begin to imagine what it feels like to be in your shoes, but I feel grateful you trusted me to share your honest reflections. I deeply admire your strength, patience, and perseverance.*

*Also, I'm working on being a better listener and friend, and –if you're open to it– I'd love to hear how that conversation felt for you? Is there anything I can do differently or anything you need from me?"*

**Being open to feedback is essential. It's the only way this conversation keeps moving forward.**

Before, during, and after we show up with solidarity-intentions, we must stay unattached to particular outcomes.

Because, if we really want to build bridges and heal divides—deeper self-reflection—with our hearts, minds, *and* clear eyes—is essential.

And leading with that level of consciousness and intentionality isn't always easy. This journey involves interrupting patterns and confronting incongruences, which can sometimes shake us.

We all have blindspots. I'll always consider myself a work-in-progress and intentionally work to uncover my blind-spots and communicate with consciousness as a leader.

I will always start by "holding up the mirror" and doing self reflection about my privileges and my identity.

I will always ask myself this question: **"How do I need to show up in order to be experienced in alliance with my colleagues of a different racial and ethnic backgrounds?"**



If you need some reminders as you're building new habits, our S.P.A.R.K. acronym is a good reminder of stances you can take:

- S- SHOW UP. FOR RACIAL JUSTICE. FOR LGBTQ JUSTICE. JUST SHOW UP
- P- PAUSE. REFLECT ON YOUR INTENTIONS. LISTEN WITH FEARLESSNESS AND INTENTIONALITY
- A- ASK BEFORE ASSUMING. SHOW CURIOSITY RATHER THAN CERTAINTY ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES.
- R- RESPECT AND SEEK OUT MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES
- K- KINDLY EXPECT TENSION AND BE COMFORTABLE WITH THE UNCOMFORTABLE

Remember, lasting transformation cannot happen overnight. It's okay to fumble and fall, just keep getting back up.

A good friend's mentor said this: **"confidence comes from evidence."**

The more we do something, the more confident we become at it.

What's ONE thing you commit to doing differently as you think about your aspiration to be experienced in alliance with someone in your community who is a Person Of Color?

Then, I'd encourage you to make a statement/write it down:

- "I want to learn more about..."
- "I intend to listen more closely to..."
- "I will pay more attention to...."
- "I will get better at...." or
- "I will show up with..." or
- "I will do..."
- "I will work on being more..."

## S.P.A.R.K. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES INVOLVE:

- Acknowledging and accepting unproductive mindsets and old patterns of behavior, raising awareness of blind-spots and biases that impact one's leadership
- Interrupting those patterns by setting intentions and taking small steps to shift habits
- Embracing the unique strengths and assets that each leader has, which in turn helps them lead authentically with intentionality, conviction, confidence.
- Increasing comfort navigating the transitions, tensions, and complexities of their organization.

## CURIOUS TO LEARN MORE?

- Download my new S.P.A.R.K. Leadership Self-Assessment [here](https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/https://rachelvrosen.lpages.co/selfassessment/)
- Learn more about S.P.A.R.K. leadership opportunities
  - Retreat
  - 12 week course
  - 1:1 coaching

- If you identify as a White Racial Justice Advocate and are looking for resources, I wrote this for you (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/http://spark4humanity.com/876-2/>).
- I also wrote this piece (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/http://spark4humanity.com/what-it-means-to-be-comfortable-with-the-uncomfortable/>) a few weeks ago, where I shared some reflections on my experience.
- For more on blind-spots, click here (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/http://www.rachelvrosen.com/2017/05/know-your-blindspots-be-a-better-leader/>).
- **Finally, here are 2 other blogs** “For White Friends Desiring To Be Allies” (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/https://sojo.net/articles/our-white-friends-desiring-be-allies>)... and “10 Things Allies Need To Know” (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/11/things-allies-need-to-know/>), which resonate and align closely with my message.



**What resonated most? What are you curious to learn more about?**



COMMENT BELOW AND LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK!



S.P.A.R.K. was founded in 2016 by Rachel Rosen, a seasoned facilitator, racial equity leadership coach, and LGBTQ advocate. S.P.A.R.K. offerings sit at the nexus of Rachel's personal and professional passions, and she is on a mission to bring more empathy to the world, one conversation at a time. With a Masters from Stanford, and extensive training in leadership, coaching, team and organizational development, S.P.A.R.K. experiences are grounded in theory and practice. S.P.A.R.K. offers experiences that support leaders and teams to unleash their potential to facilitate powerful experiences, collaborate, and build trust.

- Bad Ally (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/https://www.pinterest.com/pi>
- Reflect/connect (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/https://www.google.coab.3..oi67k1j0jo167k1j0.7416.7416.0.7926.1.1.0.0.0.0.83.83.1.1.0....0...1.1.64.psy-ab-0.1.82>
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- Got privilege (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/https://www.google.com/biw=1399&bih=776&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=leverage+privilege&oq=leverage+privilege&gs>
- Word with Friends! (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/https://www.google.c>
- Listen and learn (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180501052542/https://www.google.coq=l>
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