

Why Being An Ally Isn't Enough: What It Means to Be An Advocate for Black and African American Team Members

By the *Black and African American Affinity Group* at
Spencer Stuart

During Black History Month, we celebrate Black and African American leaders, businesspeople, inventors, intellectuals, artists, athletes and many others. First celebrated in the U.S. in 1926 during a week in February that encompassed the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, Black History Month is now observed in Canada, Ireland and the U.K. as well. It began as an occasion to recognize the importance of Black history in the drama of the American story. Since then, it has morphed into an opportunity to expand the consciousness globally of the Black experience and to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of important Black people and events in every area of endeavor throughout the history of the African diaspora.

Black History Month is also a time to reflect on the racial inequities that remain, including the slow progress made so far in increasing the racial diversity among senior business leaders. A 2020 Stanford University study looked at racial representation at Fortune 100 companies to better understand the pipeline for future CEOs and board members and found that only 3 percent of CEO roles — and 7 percent of positions likely to lead to CEO and board positions — were held by leaders from Black and African American communities, which make up nearly 14 percent of the U.S. population.¹ This, despite mounting evidence that diverse organizations are more likely to financially outperform their peers and excel in other critical areas, including innovation and employee retention.

We have seen growing demands among investors, employees and other stakeholders for progress on diversity, equity and inclusion. These allies in the push for greater racial equity and fuller inclusion are helping to keep the issue front and center for CEOs and boards.

Allyship can only go so far, however. To drive meaningful, long-term change and progress, more allies will need to become advocates. What's the difference? One of our affinity group members explains the difference like this: "An ally supports you by sitting in the audience, smiling and clapping during and after your performance. An advocate is the person who helps make the performance possible, introduces you on the stage and provides a strong review and testimonial afterwards."

What does it mean to be an advocate at work?

In our view, advocates are distinguished by their actions in addition to their words. They are not merely supportive, passive observers. Advocates invest their time, reputation and resources. They provide honest give and take. "This is somebody who gets to know you, who can be a truth counselor to you, but, at the same time, is willing to step over that line and take a risk with you," one of our members explains. The relationships with advocates are trusted ones built on mutual respect and commitment, not charity. Unlike some mentoring relationships that may last only for the length of a job or formal commitment, many of these relationships last for years — sometimes, a lifetime.

¹ Larcker, D.F. and Tayan, B. April 2020. Diversity in the C-Suite: The dismal state of diversity among Fortune 100 senior executives. Stanford Closer Look Series.

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Many of us have experienced workplace advocacy that opened doors to new opportunities, provided insight into how to effectively navigate a new environment or removed barriers to advancement. Here are some examples:

“I confidentially shared my curiosity about a new role with a white colleague who was in a more senior position and, due to her role, had a better sense of what was out there. She asked if I’d be open to her doing some quiet exploring for me to figure out what opportunities may be emerging. She came back with a plan — she would suggest that I be looped into a project that would give me increased visibility and pertinent experience, so I’d have a better chance of being considered for the new opportunity. Ultimately, I got the new role.”

“Without prompting, my new boss took me under her wing and explained the unwritten rules of the new world I was inhabiting. She openly shared cultural do’s and don’ts, professional tips and tricks and so many life lessons that I still call upon today. She mentored, advocated for and sponsored me. While I would have added value in my role regardless (I’m that type of worker), she made it easy to feel invested in her vision and the organization’s mission and I wanted to deliver nothing but great work.”

“I was interested in a position with a different group. While the work was like previous roles, it was a stretch opportunity, complicated by the fact that I was newly married, pregnant with our first child and about to buy a house. The group head of the unit asked me how I planned to manage so many significant life changes. I shared my plan. He poked holes, made suggestions and, as group head, ultimately placed me in the new role several months later. If he had been just an ally, he would have listened and made suggestions, but would not have made the move possible. He did that by advocating and sponsoring. It was hard asking for the role and for help as I saw many of my counterparts get ‘tapped on the shoulder’ for opportunities, something that wasn’t happening for me. I didn’t realize until then how important it was to have a sponsor and an advocate over and above having an ally or a mentor.”

“One of the biggest differences I’ve seen between an ally and an advocate is that my advocate saw my potential and was willing to take the time to help me find direction. My advocate walked me through the process of expressing my interest in a new role and validated why I was deserving of a promotion. This advocate also encouraged me to reach out to others and cultivate relationships with other potential advocates with different experiences.”



How can leaders and coworkers move beyond allyship to advocacy for their Black and African American colleagues?

Here are three suggestions

1. Develop a greater understanding of the experiences of Black and African American team members. Learning about the specific issues and challenges your Black colleagues face enables you to recognize when your visible support and action could make a difference. “Leaders, team members and coworkers have to become better understanders to be advocates. It is easy to listen to someone complain about things they would like to change. However, if you do not understand where that person or those people are coming from, it will not resonate as deeply,” one of our members explains.

This requires leaders and others to seek out the perspectives of their Black and African American colleagues and take them to heart. They can reflect on how their actions encourage or discourage connections with these colleagues by considering questions such as:

- » Do I take the negative effects of bias and systemic racism on Black people and other people of color seriously?
- » Do I consider who is “in the room” and who isn’t for certain discussions and meetings?
- » How am I contributing to the sense of belonging and inclusion that Black people in my organization feel?
- » How do my leadership team and I speak about diversity, equity and inclusion, especially about issues surrounding race?
- » Have I been willing to address blind spots and uneven playing fields where I can?
- » Are my actions more reflective of an advocate or ally?
- » What will I do differently now?

2. Build deeper relationships across a more diverse set of colleagues. The most powerful advocacy-oriented relationships emerge organically and develop over time, often beginning when a leader sees potential in someone and invests time in getting to know him, her or them. In these relationships, advocates take a sincere interest in the other person’s career, providing advice and direction and encouraging the exploration of opportunities that the individual might not think of on his, her or their own. Advocates are willing to put their brand on others’ careers to open doors to new opportunities. Finally, they encourage those they advocate for to become advocates for others.



Become an agent of change in your organization. Advocating for Black and African American colleagues can take many forms, including speaking up in the moment about harmful language or behavior that limits the opportunities for Black and African American people. It can also include proactively promoting the talents and successes of colleagues whose work might otherwise be overlooked. “You can be a change agent by going out of your way to showcase the talents of people who you believe in,” one of our members advises. This might include reaching out directly to a hiring manager and suggesting a person for a new role (with his, her or their permission), making sure others are aware of a person’s contributions to a project or department and bringing a person into a project that could enhance his, her or their development and visibility. One of our members describes it this way: “An advocate is someone who not only supports your self-driven goals and growth, but also leads that same push for you in their own spaces of influence.”



Accelerating progress when it comes to belonging, inclusion, impact, diversity, equity, access, agency and leadership — like any major organizational change that must be embedded — requires a holistic, systemic approach that addresses strategy, culture, processes and more. And yet, individual leaders and allies for the Black and African American community can play an important role in this space by becoming advocates. By embracing advocacy and building rich, interpersonal relationships with Black and African American team members and others from underrepresented, underestimated, under-resourced and underserved groups, advocates help create more inclusive and high-performing organizations that benefit everyone. As one of our members explains, “Companies that are really successful are not successful just because they have an unbelievably talented CEO or top C-suite leadership. They’re successful because they have advocates throughout that organization who can build confidence and build talent because they take the time to know people.”



This is the first in a series of articles about advocacy and allyship by the Black and African American Affinity Group at Spencer Stuart.

This article was authored by the **Black and African American Affinity Group** at Spencer Stuart

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