Allyship in Action

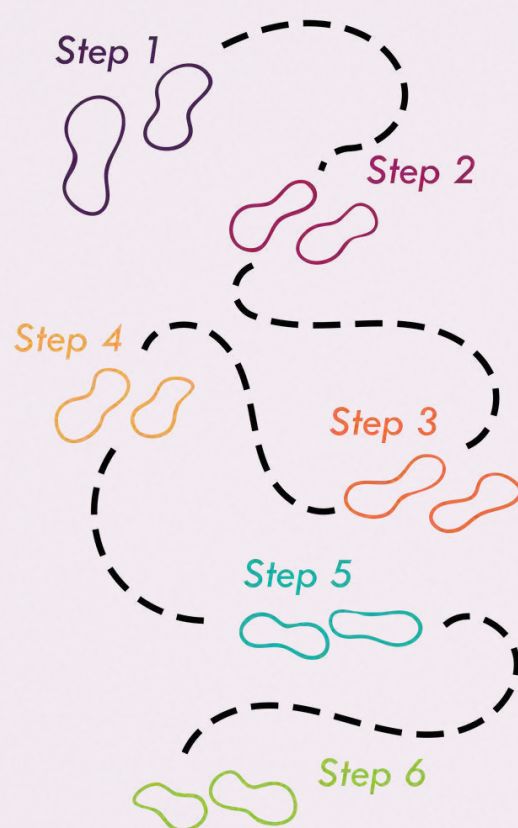## A Guide to Effective Allyship in the Workplace

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Guide

Allyship in Action

This guide is designed to provide you with the awareness, insights, and practical tools needed to understand the different forms of racism, including ethnic minority stress, and how to recognize exclusionary and discriminatory behavior in everyday situations.

Ethnic minority stress refers to the unique pressures faced by individuals from marginalized ethnic groups, often stemming from discrimination, microaggressions, and systemic inequities. Through a series of exercises and reflective steps, you will learn how to spot and address racism while developing a deeper understanding of the stress experienced by ethnic minorities. Additionally, this guide will support you in taking actionable steps toward becoming a champion of allyship and a supportive colleague.

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Step 1:
Acknowledging the Existence of Racism and Discrimination

Introduction

Being a Champion of Allyship, whether you are a leader or a colleague, fostering an inclusive and equitable workplace is essential. One of the critical aspects of this commitment is understanding and addressing ethnic minority stress. The first step in this process is to acknowledge that racism and discrimination exist, even at the workplace.

However, in a Danish context, conversations around racism can be particularly challenging. Many of us associate racism solely with overt acts of discrimination and, therefore, with being an inherently bad person. This perspective can evoke feelings of shame and defensiveness, making it difficult to engage in open discussions about systemic and unconscious biases.

Another factor that complicates these conversations is Nordic exceptionalism, the belief that Nordic countries are inherently egalitarian and tolerant. This perception can create a barrier to acknowledging racial discrimination, as it fosters the assumption that racism is not a significant issue in Danish society.

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Additionally, Denmark's strong emphasis on social cohesion and sameness can make discussions about racial or ethnic differences uncomfortable. The cultural value of conformity and integration may unintentionally discourage open dialogue about systemic inequities.

Together, these factors, though often rooted in good intentions, can lead to resistance against meaningful discussions on anti-racism. To make progress, it is crucial to shift the focus away from labeling individuals as racist and instead emphasize the importance of recognizing systemic and unconscious biases that contribute to workplace inequities.

By framing these conversations around collective growth, awareness, and systemic change, rather than personal blame, we can foster a more inclusive and equitable work environment.

Shifting the Perspective on Racism

Rather than viewing racism as an identity (something people are), this guide encourages you to view racism as an action, thought, or structure (something people do). Often, these actions and structures are unconscious and have been embedded in societal norms through generations. By understanding racism in this way, you can take proactive steps to dismantle biased systems and create an environment where all colleagues can thrive.
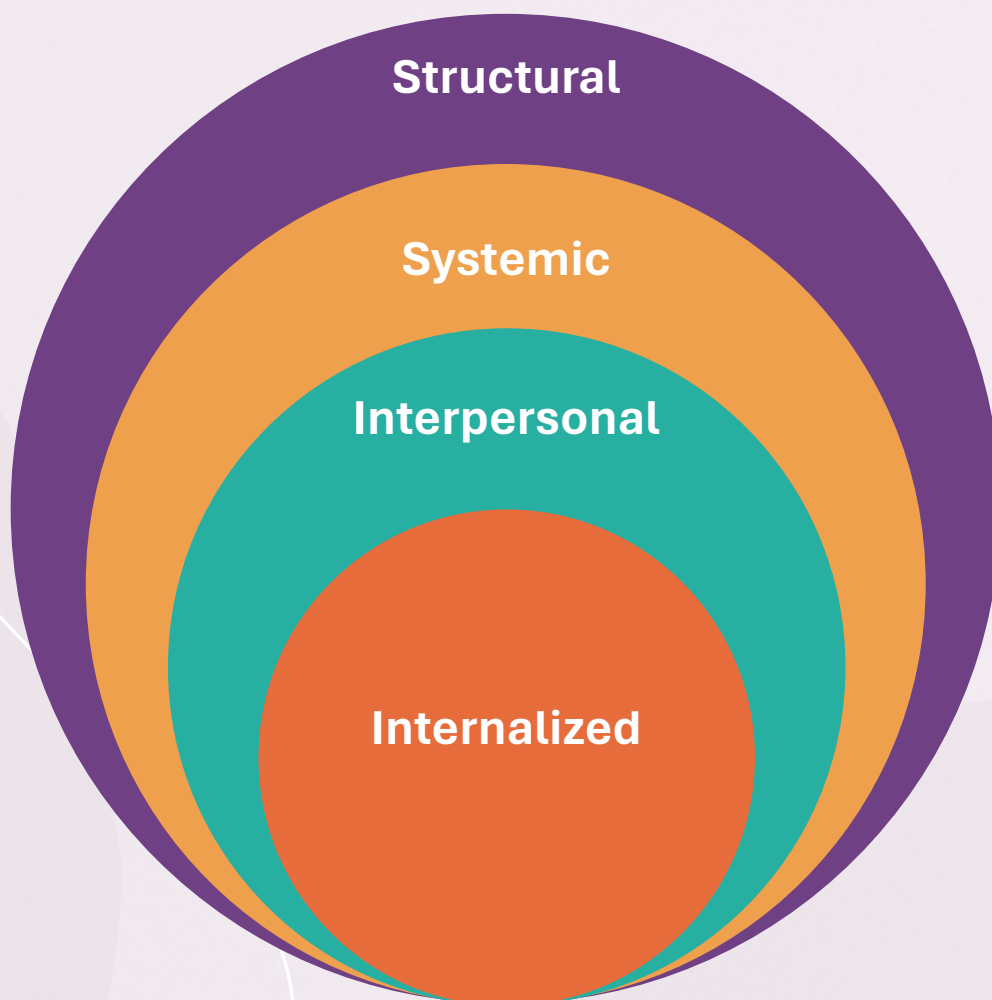
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Why Acknowledgment is Essential and Next Steps

Ethnic minority stress arises when individuals experience racism and/or discrimination, whether overtly or subtly. Acknowledging the existence of racism and discrimination is therefore the first step. The next steps involve equipping yourself with the tools to recognize and counteract these issues in your workplace. This is why our next step will be to explore the different forms of racism that exist to know what racism looks like, so you can spot it when it occurs.

Four Different Forms of Racism

To understand racism, we will dive four different levels of racism that this guide will take into account:

Structural

Systemic

Interpersonal

Internalized

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Structural racism refers to the systematic and institutionalized practices, policies, and norms that create and uphold unequal opportunities, disadvantages, and outcomes for individuals based on their racialization or ethnicity within social, economic, and political structures.

Systemic racism refers to the policies, practices, and structures within institutions that result in and perpetuate unequal opportunities and outcomes for people based on their racialization or ethnicity. It operates across society and is so embedded in systems that it can be perceived as reflecting the "natural, inevitable" order of society, reinforcing racial disparities in areas like education, employment, healthcare, and justice.

Interpersonal racism refers to discriminatory actions, words, or behaviors between individuals that express prejudice, bias, or hostility based on racialization or ethnic background. It occurs in personal interactions and reflects conscious or unconscious racial attitudes.

Internalized racism occurs when individuals from marginalized racialized groups adopt and believe negative stereotypes or prejudices about their own race or ethnic backgroumd. This can lead to self-doubt, diminished self-worth, or acceptance and reproduction of discriminatory sociaetal norms.

How do these different types of racism manifest at the workplace?
Now let us take a closer look at how these four levels of racism can manifest in the workplace across structural, systemic, interpersonal, and internalized dimensions in the following ways:

Structural Racism

This operates at a macro level, where workplace policies, practices, or societal norms disproportionately disadvantage certain racialized or ethnic groups. Here are some examples:

Lack of representation of minorities in leadership roles.
According to a study by the analysis company Denominator the 4.9 percent of the population who have a family background in the Middle East, North Africa or Turkey only hold 0.15 percent of the seats in the executive rooms and 1.66 percent of the board positions in the 100 largest Danish companies.

Unequal pay or promotion opportunities tied to historical inequities.
According to a working paper from Copenhagen Business School by Lasse Folke Henriksen and Sara Louise Muhr men who have immigrated from a so-called 'non-Western' country - with higher education from Denmark experience higher wage gaps than their female peers. And in a report by Pluss, Actionaid Denmark, and LG Insight it is shown that not only are immigrants from so-called 'non-Western' countries largely overrepresented in the lowest tier and within manual labor jobs. On top of this, they are also paid between 3800 to 5700 DKK less a month than their ethnic Danish peers.

Cultural Norms, Inclusion, and Cultural Add vs. Cultural Fit

Policies and practices in the workplace often reflect prevailing cultural norms, expectations about behavior, attitudes, and interactions that shape how we engage with others. These norms are often implicit, meaning they are not formally stated but are widely understood and followed. While they are not inherently harmful and can help maintain social order, they can become exclusionary when they are seen as the "natural" or default way of operating.

Therefore, when we think about diversity, equity, and inclusion we must go beyond surface-level representation, such as hiring employees from diverse ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, or skin colors, and also consider cultural add rather than just cultural fit.

Cultural Fit occurs when employees align with the dominant norms of an organization, even if they come from different backgrounds. For example, if two employees share a similar education, work history, and professional network, even if they are from different nationalities, their experiences may largely conform to the same workplace expectations. This can create an environment where employees integrate smoothly, but it may also lead to group thinking and limit diversity of thought. In such cases, diversity may exist on the surface, but deeper cultural diversity, such as differences in perspectives, problem-solving approaches, or ways of working, is not necessarily present.

Cultural Add, on the other hand, happens when employees bring new ways of thinking, perspectives, and lived experiences that challenge or expand the dominant workplace culture. This goes beyond visible diversity (such as age, gender, or skin color) to include differences in values, customs, communication styles, and decision-making approaches. Rather than expecting employees to conform, organizations that prioritize cultural add actively seek out individuals who can contribute fresh insights and enhance the company's adaptability and inclusivity.

Beyond Representation: Creating Space for Authenticity

Even when an organization achieves both visible diversity and diversity of thought, employees may still feel pressure to conform. Some may mask aspects of their identity or engage in code-switching, altering their behavior, speech, or expressions to fit into dominant workplace norms. This can limit the benefits of cultural diversity and prevent employees from fully contributing their unique perspectives.

Therefore, a workplace with employees from different backgrounds does not automatically achieve cultural add, in many cases, it still reflects cultural fit. True inclusion means ensuring that diverse employees feel empowered to bring their authentic selves to work, rather than simply assimilating into existing norms.

Systemic Racism

This is embedded in the systems and processes within the organization, perpetuating disparities regardless of intent. Here are some examples:

Bias in recruitment processes or algorithms leading to fewer minority candidates being shortlisted. In Denmark, studies show that applicants with Middle Eastern sounding names have to send 52% more job applications than those with ethnic Danish names to land an interview. And women who wear a religious veil, they have to send 60% more applications than ethnic Danish women to secure a job interview. Also, a report from The Institute of Human Rights states that among ethnic minorities who have applied for a job within the past year, 63 percent report having been rejected due to their ethnic background. And when we look at the gender disparity 69 percent of men reported this and for women it is 57 percent.

Performance evaluations influenced by unconscious bias, resulting in uneven recognition or advancement as well as networking opportunities or mentorships skewed toward dominant racial groups. While studies on these subjects are limited in a Danish context, studies from USA report how racial bias in performance evaluations and networking opportunities perpetuates workplace inequities. For example, an analysis by New York Times journalists revealed that performance review systems consistently assigned lower ratings to employees of color compared to their white counterparts, negatively impacting promotions, compensation, and career advancement. Similarly, research from NCWIT.org shows that supervisors often give

Black employees lower performance scores without clear justification, and employees engaging in diversity initiatives, particularly women and people of color, may face diminished evaluations. In networking, a LinkedIn study found that connection requests from Black men's profiles were 13% less likely to be accepted than those from white men's, limiting access to mentorship and career growth opportunities.

⇦ Interpersonal Racism

This occurs through interactions between individuals, where racism is expressed overtly or subtly. Here is an example:

Interpersonal racism in the workplace often manifests in subtle but harmful ways that undermine inclusivity and belonging. Microaggressions, such as making assumptions about someone's abilities based on their race, can create feelings of isolation and frustration. Minority colleagues may also face exclusion from informal networks or social events, limiting their access to crucial relationship-building opportunities. Additionally, harassment, demeaning jokes, or comments about a colleague's racial or cultural background not only harm individuals but also contribute to a toxic work environment.

😔 Internalized Racism

This happens when employees internalize societal biases, impacting their confidence, behavior, or sense of belonging. Here is an example:

Internalized racism can significantly impact employees' confidence, engagement, and sense of belonging in the workplace. Employees from marginalized racial groups may experience self-doubt or hesitate to pursue promotions due to internalized racial stereotypes about their abilities. They may also feel compelled to downplay aspects of their identity to conform to workplace norms, such as through code-switching, which can be emotionally taxing. Additionally, some employees may come to view mistreatment or bias as "normal" or deserved, leading to disengagement and reduced participation in workplace activities or opportunities.

Understanding Ethnic Minority Stress in the Workplace

Racism and discrimination, in all their forms, contribute to ethnic minority stress, a unique and persistent form of stress experienced by individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds. This stress arises from the expectation of being perceived as different (othered) or even as inherently wrong. Unlike general workplace stress, ethnic minority stress is socially driven, stemming from exclusionary behaviors, biases, and systemic inequalities.

How Ethnic Minority Stress Manifests in the Workplace

Employees experiencing ethnic minority stress may exhibit:

- **Hyperawareness of behavior and performance** – Constant self-monitoring to avoid negative stereotypes or biases.
- **Feelings of being othered or ostracized** – A sense of exclusion, alienation, or being perceived as different.
- **Physical, psychological, and relational consequences** – Symptoms such as heart palpitations, difficulty sleeping, ruminations, self-doubt, and reluctance to share opinions or ideas.

According to the report Ethnic Minority Stress in the Workplace:
- **68.2%** of ethnic minority employees report experiencing discrimination at work.
- **74.7%** state that it negatively affects their overall well-being in the workplace.
- **73.9%** have not reported their experiences of discrimination, often due to fear of not being taken seriously.

Breaking the Silence: Developing Inclusive Language

The root cause of ethnic minority stress is racism and discrimination, yet, as we have previously discussed, these topics are often considered taboo or difficult to address. As a consequence, many employees and leaders struggle with how to engage in these discussions without reinforcing an "us vs. them" mentality.

So how do we create a workplace culture where these issues can be openly discussed, acknowledged, and addressed? The next section will explore practical steps for becoming a Champion of Allyship.

Step 2:
Find Your Motivation

Identifying Your Motivation for Active Allyship

Practicing active allyship starts with understanding why you want to make a difference in your workplace. Your motivation serves as the foundation for sustained, meaningful action.

Reflection Exercise: What Drives You?
Take a moment to reflect on your personal motivation for engaging in allyship. Write down your thoughts:
➡ My motivation to make a difference in my workplace is: [Write here]

Now, consider where your motivation fits among the categories below. Which box or boxes resonate with you? You can tick as many boxes that resonate with you.

Justice

☐ I want to comply with the law.

☐ I want to ensure that everyone has equal access to well-being.

Other [Write here]: ....

Personal Indignation

☐ I am a parent, friend, or colleague of someone who experiences discrimination and racism.

☐ I am appalled that racism still exists and want to contribute to dismantling it.

Other [Write here]: ....

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Leadership

☐ I want to improve my leadership skills.

☐ I want to broaden my perspective and better understand my employees and colleagues.

☐ Other [Write here]

....

Colleagueship

☐ I want to enhance my collaboration and teamwork skills.

☐ I want to gain new perspectives and better understand my colleagues.

Other [Write here]

....

Privilege Awareness

☐ I want to learn how to use my privilege and power to break down barriers for others.

☐ I want to identify and address my blind spots.

Other [Write here]

....

Sense of Community

☐ I am passionate about fostering inclusive communities that reflect and uplift everyone.

☐ I want to create a workplace where every individual experiences belonging.

Other [Write here]

....

Other Motivations: [Write here] ....

Next Steps: Turning Motivation into Action

Understanding your motivation is just the first step. The next step is using this awareness to take intentional actions that contribute to systemic workplace change. Keep your motivation in mind as you engage in allyship, ensuring that your efforts align with creating a more equitable, inclusive environment.

Step 3:
Getting to Know Yourself - An Intersectional Approach

Understanding Yourself Through an Intersectional Lens

Recognizing and understanding your own identity is a crucial step in promoting empathy and respect for the diverse experiences of others. By applying an intersectional approach, you can develop a more nuanced and effective practice of active allyship.

What is Intersectionality?

Intersectionality highlights how different aspects of a person's identity, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and more, interact to create unique experiences of privilege, discrimination, or disadvantage. These factors do not exist in isolation but overlap and influence each other.

For example, a Black woman may face both racism and sexism, creating challenges that are distinct from those faced by someone who only experiences one form of discrimination.

Why Take an Intersectional Approach?

✅ **Creates Language for Different Life Experiences**

Beyond identity markers, everyone navigates life circumstances that shape their experiences —such as managing family illness, pregnancy, financial hardship, or aging-related challenges. Recognizing these factors helps foster a more inclusive and empathetic workplace culture.

☑️ **Reduces Oversights in Allyship**

Being an effective ally means recognizing that your perspective is not universal. Instead of assuming that others share your experiences or preferences, a better approach is to treat people the way they want to be treated.

To practice this, consider asking yourself:
- What experiences do I not have?
- Who in my workplace might have a different perspective from me?
- How can I make an extra effort to listen, learn, and engage with respect?

☑️ **Strengthens Psychological Safety**

When people feel seen and understood, they are more likely to share their needs and experiences without fear of judgment. A workplace that recognizes and values diverse identities creates an environment where everyone feels safe to contribute authentically.
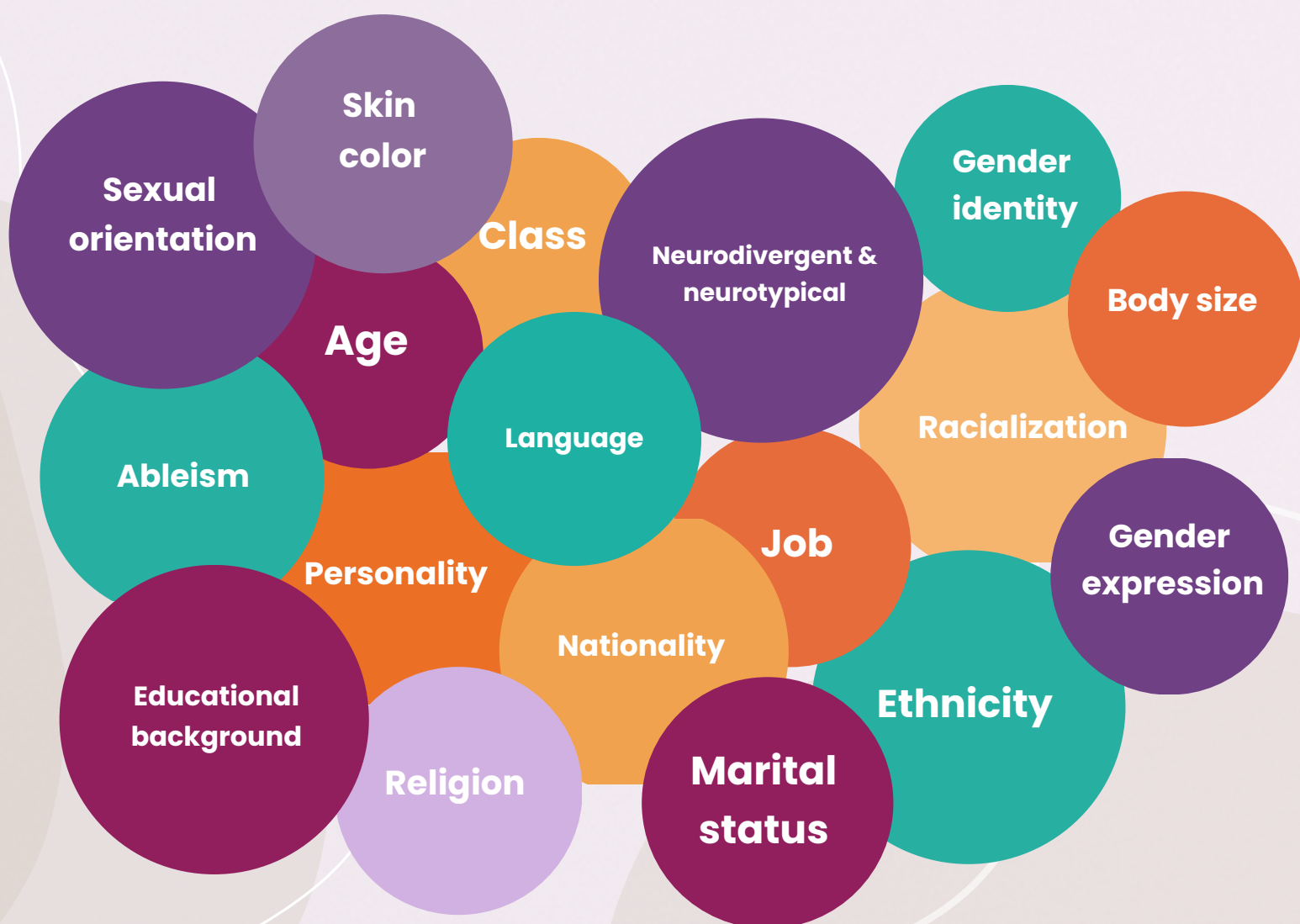
☑️ **Creates Sustainable Solutions**

An intersectional approach is grounded in understanding diverse life experiences, not just those of a single marginalized group. By addressing the interconnected nature of identities, it leads to solutions that are more adaptable and lasting. This approach ensures that changes are not only relevant to one group but contribute to a culture of inclusivity and empathy that benefits everyone.

Next Steps: Exploring Your Own Intersections

While you may never fully understand another person's lived experience, self-reflection is a powerful first step. In the next section, we'll guide you through exercises designed to help you recognize your own intersections and use this awareness to become a more effective ally

When I am aware of my own intersections and can talk about them, others also dare to talk about their needs.
While you will never know how it feels to be in everybody else's shoes, let us start by doing a couple of exercises.

Sexual orientation · Skin color · Class · Age · Neurodivergent & neurotypical · Gender identity · Body size · Language · Racialization · Ableism · Personality · Job · Gender expression · Nationality · Educational background · Religion · Marital status · Ethnicity

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Exercise 1: Your Cake Layers

Taking a look at your identity markers, positions, and life situation – you might find out that you and your colleagues are more alike than different from each other. This is also what we can call taking a look at your intersections.
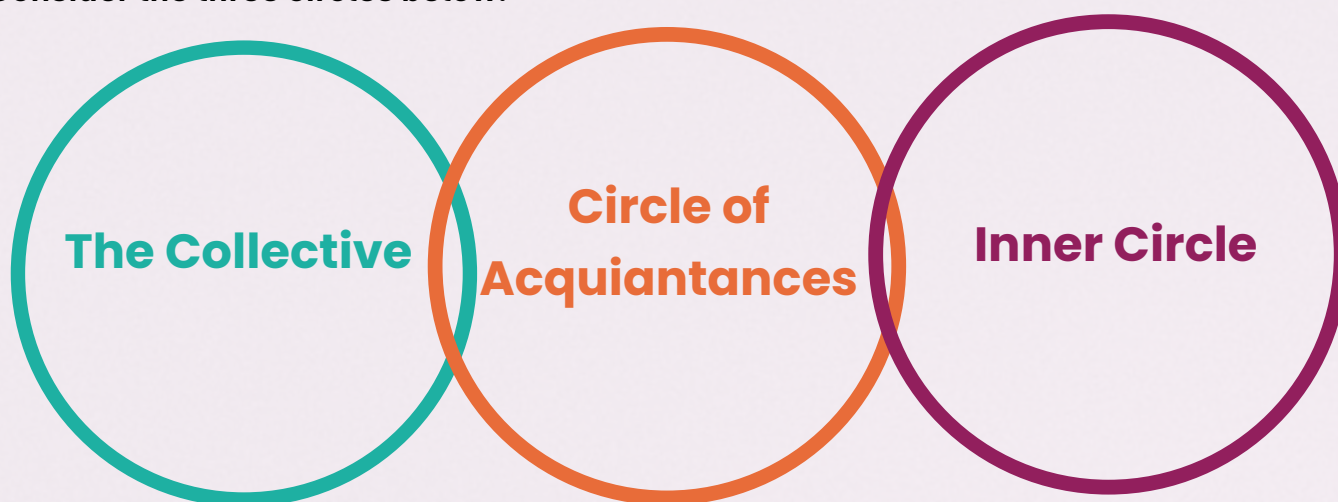
Draw and fill in your own piece of cake and choose at least 10 intersections for example:

- What are your visible intersections/external characteristics? (skin, hair, facial features, physical ability, body size, gender)
- What are your invisible intersections? (political beliefs, religion, gender identity, nationality, neuro diverse or typical, mental health)
- How do your life circumstances affect your vulnerabilities right now? (menopause, illness, first-time parent, graduate, senior)

Skin, hair, facial features ....

Political beliefs, religio ....

Menopause, illness, graduate ..

Other:

Exercise 2: Your Circles

Consider the three circles below:

The Collective

Circle of Acquiantances

Inner Circle

- **The Collective –** Broader communities you are part of (e.g., nationality, Danish society, cultural groups, social organizations, or online communities).
- **Circle of Acquaintances** – People you interact with in structured settings (e.g., workplace, professional networks, associations that you are a part of).
- **Inner Circle** – Your closest relationships (e.g., close friends, family, trusted confidants).

Reflect on the following questions:

1. **Information Sharing** – In which circles do you share different types of information about yourself? Are there things you choose to withhold in certain circles? If so, what are they and why?
2. **Sense of Belonging** – In which of these circles do you feel a strong sense of belonging? What contributes to that feeling?
3. **Fitting In vs. Authenticity** – Do you ever feel the need to "fit in" rather than be yourself in any of these circles? If so, which ones and why? Conversely, where do you feel you can be your authentic self, and what enables that?
4. **Vulnerability** – In which circles do you feel comfortable being open about your challenges or vulnerabilities? What makes it easier or harder to do so?

Take your time to reflect on these questions and consider how your experiences in these circles shape your sense of identity, connection, and self-expression.

Step 4:
How to Spot Racism and Discrimination

Understanding Racism: The Iceberg Analogy

Racism, like an iceberg, has both visible and hidden layers. While overt racism is easier to recognize, much of it remains unseen, especially by those who do not experience it firsthand. Structural and systemic racism often feel like the "natural order" because they have been ingrained and reinforced over generations. To effectively address racism, we must learn to recognize not just its visible forms but also the deeper, less obvious manifestations.

Visible Racism
This includes direct and explicit acts, such as:
- Hate crimes
- Verbal and physical racial abuse
- Openly discriminatory behavior

Hidden Racism
The majority of racism lies beneath the surface, making it harder to identify and challenge. This includes the formerly forms of racism that we discussed:

- **Structural racism** – Policies, practices, and social norms that create unequal opportunities and outcomes based on race.
- **Systemic racism** – Discrimination embedded within institutions, such as education, employment, and healthcare.
- **Indirect interpersonal racism** – Subtle, often unintentional actions or comments (e.g., microaggressions) that reinforce racial bias.

Understanding Microaggressions in the Workplace

Microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional, yet harmful remarks or actions directed at individuals from minoritized groups. While they may seem insignificant on their own, their cumulative impact can be profound.

Consider this analogy:

Imagine you are outside on a summer evening and get bitten by a mosquito. It is irritating, but manageable. However, now imagine being bitten repeatedly, day after day. Over time, these small irritations accumulate, leaving you frustrated, exhausted, and constantly on edge.

This is what microaggressions feel like for those who experience them. It is not just the occasional comment, such as being asked where one is "really" from, that causes the most harm. Rather, it is the ongoing pattern of remarks, subtle stereotypes, and assumptions that create a hostile or unwelcoming environment.

To the person making the remark, it may seem harmless or insignificant. But to the person on the receiving end, these repeated encounters erode their sense of belonging, forcing them to be constantly on guard and defensive about their identity.

Therefore, recognizing and addressing microaggressions, understanding that even small, unintentional actions can contribute to larger patterns of exclusion and inequity is crucial to spotting racism in everyday situations. The next exercise will help you sharpen your awareness and identify discrimination that often goes unnoticed.

Uncovering Normalized Racism and Ethnic Discrimination

We often fail to recognize racism and ethnic discrimination because certain biases and stereotypes have been normalized in the way we speak. This exercise encourages a norm-critical perspective to help you spot discriminatory language and assumptions that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Exercise 3: Swap the Group Identity

The next time you hear or read something about racialized people, ethnic minorities, or people of a certain faith, try replacing terms like "ethnic minority," "non-Western immigrant," or "descendant" with "Dane" or "Danes." Alternatively, substitute the terms with another minority group or a different faith community.

Would the statement still sound acceptable? Or does it suddenly feel uncomfortable, unfair, or even discriminatory? This simple shift can reveal the ways racism and bias are embedded in everyday language.

Exercise 4: Turn the Tables

To deepen your awareness, imagine yourself as part of a minority in another country and facing the same types of treatment that marginalized groups experience. For example:

- **Unfair Associations:** What if you, as an ethnic Dane, were expected to publicly distance yourself from other Danes because some had committed a violent crime or terrorist attack, even though you had nothing in common with them except ethnicity or nationality?
- **Cultural Ridicule:** How would it feel if your colleagues made rude or intrusive remarks about your food, complaining about the smell of bacon, Danish fishcakes (fiskefrikadeller), or meatballs (frikadeller)?
- **Othering Language:** How would you react if someone told you, "your kind…" or "you're different, not like the rest of them", implying that you are an exception to a negative stereotype?

By applying these perspectives, we can become more aware of how racism and ethnic discrimination operate in everyday interactions and learn to challenge them rather than passively accepting them as the norm.

Exercise 5: Recognizing Subtle Racism Through Domination Techniques

Another way to sharpen your ability to recognize subtle forms of racism and ethnic discrimination is by identifying The Five Domination Techniques described by Berit Ås. These strategies are used to exert power, silence marginalized groups, and reinforce inequality, often without being explicitly recognized as discriminatory.

When these techniques are applied in social or workplace settings, they can contribute to the exclusion and marginalization of ethnic minorities. Below is a brief definition of each technique, along with examples to help you spot racism and discrimination when they occur:

1.**Making Invisible** - Ignoring or excluding someone, making them feel unimportant or nonexistent.
Example: A person of color's contributions during a meeting are overlooked or dismissed, while similar ideas from others are acknowledged and praised.

2. Ridiculing - Mocking or belittling someone to undermine their confidence or credibility.
Example: A colleague makes jokes about someone's accent or cultural traditions, framing it as "harmless humor" but demeaning their identity.

3. Withholding Information - Keeping critical information from someone to limit their ability to participate or succeed.
Example: Minority employees are left out of key email threads or unofficial network meetings where important decisions are made, affecting their performance and career growth.

4. Double-Binding - Creating no-win situations where every choice is criticized.
Example: An ethnic minority employee is told they need to "speak up more" to demonstrate leadership but is later criticized for being "too aggressive" when they voice their ideas.

5. Blaming and Shaming - Holding someone responsible for problems beyond their control to discredit them.

Example: A person of color is blamed for being "too sensitive" or "playing the race card" when they report discriminatory behavior, shifting focus away from the actual issue.

Do you recognize any of these examples? Or can you come to think of other situations where you or a colleague have either been the aggressor or the aggrieved part using one or more of the Domination Techniques?

You can write your examples here:

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Remember when we discussed norms? Here's a quick recap: Norms are the implicit rules and expectations that shape how we behave and interact. While they help maintain social order, they can become harmful when we see them as the 'natural order' of things and fail to question their impact. This exercise is designed to help you do just that.

Even things that seem neutral are often shaped by dominant norms. Take "professionalism" as an example, many workplace standards are rooted in white or Western cultural norms, reflecting values and behaviors that may not be neutral or inclusive. Expectations around communication styles, dress codes, hairstyles, and attitudes toward hierarchy and assertiveness often align with these norms, unintentionally marginalizing individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

This exercise will help you identify and critically examine workplace norms, both within your organization and in your own perceptions. By doing so, you can challenge biases and work toward a more inclusive environment.

Take a moment to reflect on the following workplace themes and consider how the norms within your organization may include or exclude employees. Use these questions to guide your thinking:

- **Who benefits from the norm?** Identify the groups or individuals who naturally align with existing expectations and therefore experience advantages.
- **Who is disadvantaged by the norm?** Consider who may struggle to meet these expectations or feel excluded because of their background, identity, or preferences.
- **How is the norm upheld?** Examine practices, policies, or unwritten rules that reinforce these standards.
- **How can the norm be changed to benefit everyone?** Explore ways to make norms more inclusive and equitable for all employees and leaders.
- **What actions are needed to implement change?** Think about practical steps, including training, policy adjustments, or open discussions.
- **Would change create resistance or friction?** If so, identify the groups or individuals who might resist and understand their concerns.

Themes to examine:

- **Body, hair, and attire**: Are appearance expectations inclusive of different cultural or personal expressions?
- **Language and diction**: Is there bias toward certain accents, styles of speaking, or levels of formality?
- **Behavior**: Are communication styles or ways of expressing oneself valued differently based on cultural norms?
- **Holidays and traditions**: Do workplace celebrations reflect and respect the diversity of all employees?
- **Social and cultural capital**: Which types of knowledge, experiences, or connections are rewarded or prioritized?
- **Food and eating habits**: Are meal choices and habits in the workplace inclusive of all cultures and dietary restrictions?
- Other themes, please fill in here:

....

....

....

....

After having reflected upon the norms of your workplace, now do the same but reflect upon your own personal norms and see how you can become even more inclusive towards your colleagues.

Step 5:
Embracing Mistakes and Practicing Gentle Introspection in DEIB Work

"If you want to make something happen that hasn't happened before, you've got to allow yourself to make a lot of mistakes." - Björk

Working with diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging **(DEIB)** requires continuous learning, and mistakes are an inevitable part of that process. It's important to recognize that this work isn't easy, it's about rearranging the synaptic connections in our brains. Just as children learn to walk by falling repeatedly before they find their footing, we too must be willing to "fall" and fail in order to grow. However, as adults, we're often less adaptable, and the fear of failure can be paralyzing when we try to change long-held beliefs or practices. Rather than fearing failure, we should nurture psychologically safe environments where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities, a necessary part of unlearning deeply ingrained ideas about what we have often considered the "natural order of things."

This is why gentle introspection is so important in DEIB work. As you reflect on your own actions and the practices within your workplace, you may encounter feelings of shame, guilt, or discomfort over past behaviors or beliefs. If this happens, remember to be kind to yourself. Emotions are human, but insecurity often hides behind sadness, shame, and anger. Instead of letting those emotions dictate your actions, learn to recognize and unpack your insecurities.

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Exercise 7: Exploring Insecurity and Its Impact

Our insecurities don't just affect us, they have real consequences for others. This makes it essential to examine them more closely:

- **Who holds power in our spaces?** Who speaks up in meetings? Who stays silent?
- **Who is recognized as an "expert"?** Do we only value formal education, or do we acknowledge lived experience as a form of expertise?
- **What stories do we tell ourselves about who we are?** Are they still true, or have we outgrown them?
- **Do we assume inclusivity just because we value community?** Or are there unspoken barriers that keep certain people from fully participating?
- **Can we create safer spaces to process the discomfort of change?** Do we have the language, understanding, and tools to navigate this?
- **What gaps in knowledge is my insecurity covering up?**

Grieving and Letting Go

Sometimes, insecurity is rooted in grief, the loss of who we once were or how we once saw the world. When we allow ourselves to grieve outdated identities and perspectives, we make space to unlearn and grow. By embracing this process, we can move toward a more inclusive way of thinking and being, both individually and collectively.

Step 6:
Become a Champion of Allyship

Building an Inclusive Workplace Through Allyship

Fostering an inclusive and respectful workplace requires active allyship, the commitment to recognizing and addressing discrimination rather than ignoring or downplaying it. However, being an ally isn't always easy. It often means stepping outside your comfort zone, challenging colleagues, or navigating social discomfort. Psychological safety is essential, both for those experiencing discrimination and for those speaking up against it. Without a sense of security, the fear of backlash or isolation can prevent people from taking action.

Allyship is about challenging systemic inequities, standing in solidarity with others, and creating space for voices that have historically been silenced and excluded. It's not about being a savior; allyship is about leveraging one's privilege, power, or platform to support, advocate for, and amplify others, especially those from marginalized communities. True allyship goes beyond performative gestures, it requires active listening, self-education, and consistent action, even when it's uncomfortable and inconvenient. This practice is ongoing and intentional. It demands humility, a willingness to make mistakes, and the capacity to be held accountable without defensiveness.

We all want to feel a sense of belonging, which is why allyship takes practice. The steps below may seem easier said than done, and that's okay. Instead of aiming for perfection, focus on progress, set small milestones, celebrate them along the way, and recognize that learning is an ongoing process. We have included both concrete actions and smaller milestones to help you develop your allyship over time.

There is no such thing as the "perfect ally." Instead, being a champion of allyship means committing to doing better tomorrow than today.

Concrete Actions and Milestones for Allyship

Becoming an ally is a journey that requires intentional action and continuous learning. Below are concrete ways to support minority ethnic colleagues, along with smaller milestones to help you build confidence and develop your allyship over time.

Acknowledge and Address Discrimination

Action: Speak up when you witness microaggressions, othering, or discrimination instead of ignoring or trivializing them. Silence can reinforce harmful behaviors.

Milestone: Start by recognizing microaggressions in everyday conversations. Practice addressing them in one-on-one settings before speaking up in larger groups.

Action: If a colleague from a minority ethnic background experiences mistreatment, support them rather than pretending it didn't happen.

Milestone: Check in with the affected colleague privately to express solidarity before building the confidence to address the situation publicly.
Avoid Burdening Minority Ethnic Colleagues

Action: Do not expect colleagues to explain or justify incidents such as terrorist attacks or controversial statements made by someone who shares their ethnic or religious background.

Milestone: Challenge your own assumptions, before asking a colleague for their perspective, seek out credible sources on the topic first.

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Milestone: Challenge your own assumptions, before asking a colleague for their perspective, seek out credible sources on the topic first.

Action: Instead of placing emotional labor on them, ask empathetically how media coverage of such events affects them, acknowledging the potential stress.

Milestone: Start by becoming more aware of how media narratives impact marginalized groups and initiate thoughtful conversations rather than making assumptions.

Recognize Colleagues as Individuals

Action: Avoid treating minority ethnic employees as representatives of an entire group. Each person is an individual, not a spokesperson for their ethnicity or religion.

Milestone: Notice and challenge generalizations in your own thinking and in workplace discussions

Action: This applies to both positive and negative actions, don't generalize behavior based on identity.

Milestone: When discussing workplace diversity, highlight individual achievements rather than attributing success or struggles to a person's ethnicity.

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Listen and Validate Lived Experiences

Action: Even if you don't fully understand a colleague's experience, listen actively and acknowledge their reality.

Milestone: Practice active listening by resisting the urge to problem-solve or invalidate their feelings, start by simply saying, "I hear you."

Action: Avoid dismissing their concerns or assuming your own perspective is universal.

Milestone: Pay attention to defensive reactions in yourself and others, when you feel the urge to say, "That's not how I see it," pause and reflect instead.

Show Physical and Verbal Support

Action: If a colleague is being discriminated against, stand physically next to or behind them to show solidarity—this small action can serve as a shield.

Milestone: If you feel hesitant to intervene, start by practicing supportive body language (e.g., maintaining eye contact, nodding in agreement, or stepping closer).

Action: Use your voice to challenge inappropriate behavior when necessary.

Milestone: Begin with low-risk actions, such as asking clarifying questions (e.g., "What do you mean by that?") before directly calling out harmful behavior.

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Avoid (White) Saviorism

Action: Be mindful of not speaking over or "rescuing" minority ethnic colleagues from a place of unconscious superiority.

Milestone: Before stepping in, ask yourself, "Am I taking over this conversation, or am I amplifying someone else's voice?"

Action: Instead of assuming what is best for them, support their autonomy and amplify their voices.

Milestone: Practice redirecting conversations to center their perspectives. Example: "I think [colleague's name] had an important point. Let's hear more from them."

Reflect on Your Own Position and Privilege

Action: If you belong to the majority group, acknowledge your responsibility in fostering an inclusive workplace.

Milestone: Make it a habit to self-reflect, journal about your own biases, assumptions, and workplace interactions to track your growth over time.

Action: Be critical of your biases, expectations, and privileges, and actively work to unlearn discriminatory patterns.

Milestone: Engage with diverse perspectives, read books, follow activists, and seek out learning opportunities that challenge your worldview.

Final Thought

Allyship is not about perfection; it's about progress. Each milestone you reach brings you closer to creating a workplace where everyone feels valued, respected, and heard. Keep learning, keep practicing, and keep striving to do better tomorrow than today.

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