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When (and How) to Speak Up as an Ally

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The choice of whether to speak up as an ally can be thorny, and we sometimes struggle to manage that dilemma in our own lives. We can't offer hard-and-fast rules. What we can offer is a tool to grapple with the question, sometimes called the Platinum Rule. You're probably familiar with the Golden Rule: Treat others as you would wish to be treated. When applying that idea to allyship, it's critical to remember the other person is not just like you and may differ from you on many important dimensions. The Platinum Rule reminds you to take the other person's preference seriously, whether by asking directly or by carefully reflecting on their needs.

CONSIDER WHETHER THE AFFECTED PERSON WANTS HELP

Start by considering whether the affected person wants help at all. Social scientists have found that affected people can feel downcast when they receive unsolicited help without any evidence of need. One study found that Black students who received unsolicited help from white peers on a word puzzle reported lower self-esteem about their own competence than Black students who didn't receive such help or white students who did. Another study in Israel found that Arab students felt worse about themselves when Jewish research assistants provided unsolicited help on a test. As these studies suggest, when you help someone across a power dynamic, you risk unintentionally engaging in saviorism and implying they can't hack it on their own.

In most allyship situations, you can consider whether the affected person will welcome your help without posing the question directly. You'll often find it awkward, embarrassing, or downright impossible to ask them. We think of a male colleague who was chairing a university meeting. One of the senior faculty members boasted that the research assistants in his department were "the most beautiful women at the university." While the objectifying comment warranted a response, it would have been ridiculous for the chair to poll the women in the room to check if they wanted his help. The Platinum Rule enabled him to go it alone since he could infer that many women would want him to intervene. He adroitly spoke up on his own behalf rather than attempting to speak on theirs: "I'm concerned that in this day and age such comments about women are still being made." The faculty member turned pale and apologized.

Sometimes, however, you won't be sure whether your help is welcome. In those cases, go ahead and ask.

CONSIDER WHAT KIND OF HELP THE AFFECTED PERSON MIGHT WANT

Assuming the affected person wants help, the next step is to consider whether they want the specific form of help you're planning to offer.

One way of doing so is to enlist other allies in your community to provide input on the forms of intervention they've found most effective. Another way is to study relevant issues through the usual

channels you use to learn new subjects, such as books, articles and podcasts. Finally, when you're trying to help a specific affected person like a colleague at work, you could simply ask them what help they want.

These strategies won't guarantee positive outcomes — the proper approach to any allyship situation is always some shade of "it depends." But the Platinum Rule will give you more confidence in your choice to be a champion, an assistant, or something in between. #WednesdayWisdom

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