

ALLY to

FOR DECADES, MOST OF CORPORATE AMERICA'S diversity and inclusion initiatives shared some common features: Progress was vaguely promised, vaguely defined, and vaguely achieved. Today's leaders not only face intense pressure to change, many seem to want to do so. Yet few appear sure of what to say or do in such a polarized, charged environment.

A voice offering both intellectual rigor and compassionate counsel is Kenji Yoshino, whose writing on anti-discrimination and civil rights has appeared in major academic journals, top-tier newspapers, and in three award-winning books.

Yoshino, who studied at Harvard, Oxford and Yale Law School, is the Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Constitutional Law at the NYU School of Law. At that same institution Yoshino serves as the Director of the Center for Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging, a body that helps the law school and organizations around the US live up to those three values.

Yoshino, who lives in New York with his husband and two children, recently spoke with Brunswick's Global Head of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Head of US Recruitment, Nicole Reboe.

What is allyship?

We think of allyship as when an individual leverages their privilege to assist individuals in a group to which they do not belong.

What does it mean to leverage privilege?

Privilege is a misunderstood word. People think it means that all the lights turn green for you all the way down the road. And that's not their experience—they weren't born with a silver spoon so how dare you call them privileged. When you properly understand



privilege, it helps you understand allyship itself. My colleagues and I at the Center for Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging see privilege as any experience or characteristic that gives you an unearned advantage.

In addition to being unearned, privilege is invisible to us. We compare it to headwinds and tailwinds. If you're flying from the west coast to the east coast and I'm flying the other way and you have the tailwind and I have the headwind, you're going to beat me every time—even though the tailwind is not something you're going to notice sitting in the plane.

The critical thing is that privilege is multidimensional. We all have bundles of privilege and disadvantage. That means that in these allyship exchanges we can be fully reciprocal. I might have privileges relative to a heterosexual female colleague. I can be her ally on gender issues. And through her privilege

To “cancel” or forgive? What is privilege, and can we recognize our own? How can a company demonstrate allyship? **NICOLE REBOE** explores the answers with **KENJI YOSHINO**, an anti-discrimination and civil rights expert.



ILLUSTRATION: LINCOLN AGNEW

relative to my being a gay man, she's going to be my ally. We each are privileged depending on context, each disadvantaged depending on context.

How can we locate our own privilege? How can we leverage something that isn't in view, perhaps even to ourselves?

Oftentimes when we're called privileged, it gets our back up. The ways we've been disadvantaged are more visible to us than the ways in which we've been advantaged. As somebody who is not Black, who does not get followed around in stores, I'm unlikely to think when I'm shopping, "I'm so privileged. I get to shop without having a store detective follow me around."

Seeing the truth really begins with a posture of compassion for yourself. Having compassion for myself, I can say, "Through no fault of mine, I don't know about the experience of Black shoppers. But it is knowledge I can acquire."

The flip side of privilege being unearned is that it's not something you need to be ashamed of. It's an immutable aspect of yourself. For me to say, "I'm ashamed of being a man" would be silly and counter-productive. There's nothing wrong with being a man.

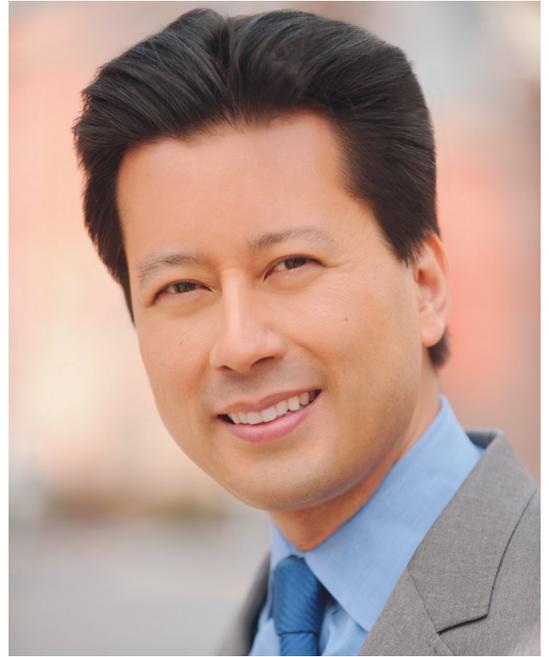
What's going to determine the measure of my personhood is whether I use that privilege for good or for ill. Allyship is one of the ways in which you can use it for good.

There's a robust social science that says we're profoundly incurious when we're fearful. But once we overcome that fear by affirming ourselves, by saying, "There's nothing wrong with being a man," then I can engage curiosity, and curiosity can lead me to hear other people. Most of what I've learned about my male privilege has come from having close colleagues and close friends who are women.

Gratitude can also play a huge role. People who get their backs up about privilege have no problem with gratitude. So instead of saying, "How are you privileged?" ask people to write down three things they're grateful for. Gratitude can often direct you toward those privileges. If I say I'm grateful for a job I'm passionate about and the means to live in the way I want to live, those are vocational and socioeconomic privileges.

How did you become aware of the importance of allyship?

One way was my own experience as a gay man, and understanding that the LGBT community, relative to the population as a whole, is really a tiny fraction of the population. If you're that small a percentage of



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the population, you're not going to be able to survive without allies. In many ways I've been a beneficiary of straight allyship. Other individuals made time for me, nurtured me, cared for me, and that kindled my interest in the concept of allyship.

I thought, why would individuals on the privileged side of the scale expend so much time and energy on other individuals and give up some of that privilege? It's actually one of the most inspiring aspects of human nature that so many people are willing to be allies.

Why is this relevant for the business world?

No one is totally privileged and no one totally disadvantaged, so everyone is going to need allies someday. That includes even the most privileged individuals in the business world or at the top of the tree in any profession. You could be the cisgender straight white man at the top of one of the Fortune 500 companies, yet because our human vulnerability is universal, at some point you will need allies.

You will lose your health privilege, or status privilege, or age privilege, your D&I privilege. When that happens, you're going to be really glad that you've built a culture that's rich in allies.

How do business leaders initiate and nurture this journey toward allyship in their organizations?

You're right that it's a journey, Nicole, and it helps to think of it in stages. We think of three stages—ally to one, ally to some, ally to all.

The ally to one is really focused on an individual. To make this real, I have a wonderful mentee

named Jess. If I'm an ally to one, I will want to get Jess through whatever promotion process she wants to get through. But because I'm an ally to one, I'm really just focused on her. I'm not thinking of her as a woman who might face headwinds that are different from the kind of tailwinds I experience based on my gender as a man. If Jess encounters non-inclusive behavior from a man, I just see him as someone to navigate around. At the same time, I don't perceive my own mistakes. I could make lots of mistakes relative to Jess and mentoring her that flow from my own unconscious bias on gender issues or my own ignorance or gaps in knowledge.

The ally to one is better than an ally to none. The ally to one at least cares about somebody who is not themselves, leveraging their privilege to help that individual. It's a fairly old school way of thinking about allyship: I have this protégé and I'm going to get them through the promotion process come heck or high water.

Then there is ally to some, which is where most people we work with are sitting now. They know about unconscious bias, about systemic racism and entrenched gender bias. They're focused on the group. As an ally to some, I'm not mentoring Jess just as an individual. I'm highly aware of the fact that she's a woman and might face challenges that I didn't have to face. I act not just on her behalf but whenever I'm inspired to do so on behalf of women. I seek to be an exception to the system.

As an ally to some, I have this mentality of, "I myself don't need allies. I'm just a good person who is helping out. I get nothing in return." The arrangement isn't reciprocal—and this is where the picture gets really dark.

When I'm an ally to some, I tend to condemn sources of non-inclusive behavior as bad people. I tend to be very condemnatory of people who make mistakes. These bad people are cast into the darkness, they're canceled. But if that's my posture, if I've divided the world between good people and bad people, I will have an incredibly hard time admitting to my own mistakes. If I make a mistake, I risk falling into that bad person category myself.

That brings us to the ally to all. The ally to all is focused on everyone, including themselves. The ally to all knows they're going to lose their privilege at some point, and they'll be glad they've created a culture that's rich in allies. Understanding that this is good for everybody means that you don't act episodically. You bake this into your systemic practices so that it's intuitive for you to act inclusively. You seek to improve the system as a whole because you're not

The ALLYSHIP Model



ALLY to ONE

Focused on an individual

Acts when an individual needs help

Remains largely unaware of systemic issues

Views sources of non-inclusive behavior as obstacles to overcome

Does not perceive own mistakes

SOME

Focused on a group

Acts when inspired to do so

Seeks to be an exception to the system

Condemns sources of non-inclusive behavior as bad people

Admits to mistakes with great difficulty

ALL

Focused on all, including self

Acts consistently by creating sustainable practices

Seeks to improve the system

Gives sources of non-inclusive behavior opportunity to grow

Accepts mistakes as invitations to learn

sitting up high watching everybody else benefit from your acts of largesse.

Being an ally to all means you understand that someday you will be the source of non-inclusive behavior. When that happens, you're going to be grateful that you're not left to stew in your office. Instead, someone will tap on your door and say, "What you did wasn't great. But I made a similar mistake and lived to tell the tale. Can I help you today? And tomorrow when I make another mistake, can I enlist you as my ally?" Then mistakes become invitations to learn instead of something you need to deny.

We've all read about Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We know that the first need is for food and shelter, and after that, physical safety. But what comes next? Belonging. Our need to belong is primal and bedrock. Allyship is a critical driver of belonging.

So there's a practical argument for choosing to forgive rather than cancel people?

I don't think that forgiveness needs to be infinite. But the strongest case against cancel culture is that we all make mistakes. In what we call the empathy triangle, there's the ally, there's the affected person, and there's the source of the non-inclusive behavior. Either I saw it, it happened to me, or I did it. If we think of this as a game of musical chairs, sometimes you're the ally. Sometimes you're the affected person. Sometimes, unfortunately, you're the source of non-inclusive behavior.

This is a truth that I know first hand. It's still mortifying for me to tell this story. But telling it is important for me to assure my own growth, and to underscore how we're all works in progress.

A few years ago, I was teaching a class on, of all things, leadership, diversity and inclusion. And I confused the only three Asian women in the class. I called them by each other's names. And the better I tried to do, the more I floundered.

The ironies are painful. I'm teaching a leadership, diversity and inclusion class. I'm a specialist in diversity-and-inclusion research, and I lead a center on diversity, inclusion and belonging. Last but not least, I am of Asian descent and I've been subjected to this terrible trope that all Asian people look alike. The idea that I would propagate this stereotype was deeply, deeply humbling for me.

By class three—and I'm embarrassed it took me that long—I just hit the pause button. I apologized to the three individuals offline. Then when the class next met, I said "I've made this error. I humbly

apologize to all of you. I've been a source of non-inclusive behavior. I would ask you to be my ally." One way I asked them to be my allies was by saying, "I'm your professor. There is power and privilege in that position. So it's understandable that you did not correct me in real time when I called somebody by a name that is not theirs. Going forward, can you please call me out if I make this or really any other D&I mistake? And if you need air cover, because of the power in the room and the power dynamics here, then please reference this conversation."

After I apologized, it wasn't immediately OK, which is an important point to relate. But by the end of the course, we were much closer to each other than we would've been had the event never occurred.

Are there right and wrong ways to be an ally?

We all know the ally who steps in for the wrong reasons. They're virtue signaling; they're cookie seeking. They want the gold star. So we ask people to pause and say, "Would I be engaged in this behavior even if nobody knew what I was doing?"

Next, am I informed enough to act? Am I informed not just about what happened between the source and the affected person, but with regard to the group in question? If I want to be an ally to the transgender community, I'd better know something about gender identity. If you're going to be their ally, it's not their job to educate you. You need to be a bit resourceful. It's oftentimes no more than a Google search. But if it takes reading a book or watching a documentary, you're either invested in this project or you're not. You may need to put in some work.

Important question for allies: Am I helping the affected person as they want to be helped? Could my intervention be received as unhelpful, embarrassing or patronizing? And should I seek permission or guidance?

The affected person may not want to be helped as you would wish to be helped. So rather than following the golden rule of helping somebody as you would wish to be helped, adopt what we call the platinum rule, of helping the other person as they would wish to be helped.

Let's say a colleague of yours walks in late for a meeting and the source says, "Oh, I see you're on Latino time or Hispanic time." You think that's problematic, and you decide to intervene. So you say, "That comment trades in an ethnic stereotype. I would ask you to retire it and not make that comment again and to apologize to the affected person." Whereas the affected person might be thinking, "Thanks, but no thanks. I have an agenda to get through for this

meeting, and now you've completely blown up any possibility that we'll get through that agenda because you've derailed us into this D&I conversation."

We suggest that you approach the affected person offline and say, "I saw that. I thought it was unfortunate. I would love to be your ally and help." Even if they say no, that is still a win because you have now outed yourself to them as an ally. Six months from now, they can remember that you noticed and cared in that moment, and say, "I need you now."

When you're a team leader, you may see behavior so egregious that you have to intervene. By all means, do so. But please intervene in your own voice. Rather than dragging the affected person into it, say, "As someone who's invested in inclusive culture, I would ask that you rethink that comment."

One of my favorite questions is, "Am I maximizing my effectiveness by thinking of systemic solutions?" Again, I have an example that doesn't necessarily reflect well on me. In my Constitutional Law class, I did a self-audit and noticed I was calling on men more than women. This is totally unacceptable to me as somebody who wanted to be an ally to women.

I tried to do better. For about three, four, five classes, I did. But as soon as I got tired or stressed or even excited about the material, I would fall back into my old ways. Psychologists have discussed this effect, saying that dealing with unconscious bias is like stretching a rubber band. When you stretch it, you can sort of change your behavior. But once you let go of it, the band snaps back into place. Economist Iris Bohnet takes on this problem in her book *What Works: Gender Equality By Design*. Her recommendation is to put in a systemic response when you're aware of the bias that prevents you from going back to the default. In my case, that meant I couldn't rely on myself. So I enlisted the help of my assistant to send me a randomized call list for each class before I started it. No matter how tired or stressed or excited about the material I got, I had the call list. That took care of the bias.

We often impute negative intent to people quickly based on negative impact. Make sure you're driving a wedge between intent and impact. Don't say, "You had negative intent." Rather, say, "I can testify that the impact it's had on me was X, Y, Z." This is not only a more principled approach, it's more accurate.

The most controversial piece of the allyship model is the argument that you should seek to be an ally to the source of non-inclusive behavior. But if you don't want to be canceled when you make a mistake, then you might want to think about forgiveness and generosity. ♦

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