
Thought Paper Executive Summary:
Integration with Leadership

July, 2020

How to be Inclusive, High Performing A-L-L-I-E-S



Who Help WOMEN Lead Boldly

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CONTEXT

Being an ally is *#newnotnew*. On the one hand, “ally” is a term that is an age-old element of leadership: support others, help them develop and grow, focus on what you can do to elevate others. On the other hand, it is **nuanced, focused on the parts of our identities and consciousness we don’t easily or often share with others, and for most leaders, out of their comfort zones to look at what they do and don’t do that might not be supportive to others.** It has come into light most significantly in the Black Lives Matter movement and yet has been around longer, especially as *#metoo* elevated the focus of leaders who wanted to be supportive and inclusive. It means different things to different people, with no consistent, clear definition. It is rooted from the French and Latin etymology meaning “*to bind together.*”

Many leaders who have the intention to “bind together” are unsure what is in or out of bounds to think, say, discuss, or do in order to demonstrate support. For many, it can feel awkward, uncomfortable, and unsafe to engage in uncharted territories of others’ identities and needs, exacerbated by not wanting to make a misstep through saying or doing something that could be perceived as offensive, rude, sexist or racist. They want to do and say the right things. They know they need to educate themselves and lead their teams and organizations to be high performing, productive and inclusive in this uncertain environment.

Most leaders want to be high performing AND want to be inclusive allies because they know high performance, inclusive teams will be more productive, engaged and exceed results. Most leaders, however, don’t know what it means to do either, much less both.

Let’s start by breaking them down into separate elements - High Performance Leadership Elements and Inclusive Ally Behaviors.

The 2 Key Elements of High Performance Leadership

High performance leadership is grounded in specific characteristics that ensue in organizations prospering financially and their people thriving personally, while feeling engaged and productive. What can leaders do to help create this type of environment? There are many behaviors and characteristics of high performing leaders, though they all share 2 key elements in common, which are the key starting points for any leader who wants to be high performing.

Key Element #1

The **FIRST key element is to look in the mirror and start by being, simply put, coach-able.** This might remind you of Growth Mindset, which Carol Dweck defined as “understanding abilities can be developed.” However, being coach-able takes it one step further as you can see from the criteria below.

To be coach-able you need to do two things:

1) Be open and receptive to how you are operating today. You seek self-awareness and realize your abilities (as a leader, parent, spouse, etc.) can be developed. The **baby step** is to self-reflect by asking yourself how you are doing in any (or all) of these areas. The **breakthrough step** is to ask others around you for input AND to be open to receiving both positive and negative feedback. Either way, gather some information about where you are strong and where you can grow. For example, one of the most common starting points is Listening. Most leaders talk more than listen, talk over others, repeat what has been said, and use “Right/Wrong” listening (I’m right) versus seeking points of views of others. Identify what makes the most sense for you.

2) Be willing to change (one or more) behaviors. This is easier said than done! First, it requires consciousness of the behavior in order to change it, which many people do not have. Notice what you do that is unhelpful. Find something tangible and simple to start. The **baby step** is to start small (“I will ask others for their input before making final decisions that impact them”). When leaders are assessing how coach-able their team members are, they aren’t looking for perfection, they are looking for progress that demonstrates the person is able to

change. The **breakthrough step** is taking a behavior you are known for (becoming defensive, talking over others, taking not sharing credit, etc.) and demonstrating real progress.

Notice for yourself what behavior/s you unconsciously do that sets you up for success versus focusing on elevating others around you (you can look at the list of behaviors on the following pages to get ideas).

Once you notice it, be willing to practice doing it 10% differently.

Avoid superlatives (“I will never ... I will always...).

Being coach-able is a process, not a destination.

Once you nail 10%, increase it over time until you feel (or get input) that you have made progress in this area. Then pick another one. And start small again, increasing over time.

Key Element #2

The **SECOND key element** is your involvement with others. Most leaders want to make changes by themselves or with their coach. They rarely ask for input, share what they are up to and almost never ask for help.

Leaders who want to have a breakthrough in their ability to be inclusive allies don't do it alone.

They see it as an opportunity to be authentic, vulnerable, and include others by asking for input or at least needs others have of them.

In our BOLD leadership work with women, we consistently hear the feedback that one of the most significant parts of the six-month program is what we call the “Two-Way Street” which is the “contracting” work women and their managers engage in with one another.

“The Two-Way Street”

The “Two-Way Street” is working with women and their managers to identify what is most needed to strengthen their mutual relationship. Usually, the level of inclusion and support women feel they receive is directly proportional to the level of trust and transparency they feel with their direct manager. This is often one of the most powerful

parts of the program, and **can only occur when both parties - managers and their directs - engage as “coach-able.”**

The Manager’s side of the “Two-Way Street”:

1) Start with your intention. State your desire to be an inclusive leader and relay that you might be doing things you are unaware of that are and are not helpful. You would like to engage them in learning more about their perspective and getting some input. Ask if they are willing to have a conversation about how you can be a supportive leader. Tell them you will be open and receptive and that you will appreciate their point of view with of course, no retribution! They need to trust that being open with you will be safe.

2) Identify what behaviors are most & least helpful. Make the conversation focus on what they tangibly observe about you as the leader. You can refer to the behaviors in the following pages and ask them what they see you doing / not doing. You can ask open ended questions. *“What behaviors do you see me do that do not support you as much as I could? What observations do you have when we are in group meetings? One-on-one conversations? With key stakeholders outside of our team?”* You can also ask them about the impact these behaviors have on them. If they ask you for input on what you see them doing, you will likely notice a relationship between their observations of you, and yours of them.

For example, I often hear some version of *my manager does all the talking in meetings, or doesn’t position me as the decision maker with outside vendors, so others keep directing questions at the leader because others don’t see me as the point of contact.* And the manager will often want the direct to *speak up more, be on point, and take initiative.* There is almost always a relationship between the needs the leader and direct have of each other.

This conversation might happen once or, ideally will open the door for continued conversations where you can each give each other input.

3) Make requests of what you need from each other. High performing leaders make clear and direct requests. Once the behavior/s have been pointed out, you want to make or summarize the requests.

For example, requests from the examples above are *for you as the leader to position me as the point person with key stakeholders, forward communication to me if they keep going to you, and defer to me as decision maker if they go to you.*

Ensure you are both clear about the requests and the followup to check in on how it's going in some appropriate timeframe.



BEHAVIORS of HIGH PERFORMING, INCLUSIVE ALLIES

There are three main areas high performance leaders focus on: their mindsets, behaviors and actions. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the behaviors allies can literally do that can increase their allyship effectiveness.

You may ask, “*what is the difference between these behaviors and good leadership behaviors?*” It’s a good question! The simple answer is “*yes, ally behaviors and leadership behaviors are good to practice all the time.*”

And, to make them high performance behaviors as allies, **it requires you to become mindful of where and with whom you are focusing your behaviors. You will need to take on a new level of awareness of yourself and others for when you are (and are not) practicing these behaviors, and the impact you are having.** To be high performing AND an ally also means that you are willing to engage others in their unsupportive behaviors, as you will see in the example below.

Example Story

In my interviews, one senior male executive we will call Michael, the CIO, described a meeting with two executives that report to him, David and Anne. Any question Michael asked Anne, David answered. He talked over her, answered for her, and behaved as if she were not in the meeting. Michael, seeing the dynamic, asked direct questions such as “I’d like to hear from Anne; Anne, what do you think about...; as Anne already mentioned...David, let’s hear from Anne on this topic” and other redirects. In spite of the obvious redirects and uses of ALLIES behaviors from the list below, David continued to miss the cues. Michael used several of the behaviors below and it wasn’t enough.

As a high performing leader, Michael asked David to stay after the meeting and used it as a coaching and feedback opportunity. He asked if he was open to observations from the meetings (i.e. feedback). When David said yes, Michael pointed out what he saw and asked David if he saw the dynamic (he didn’t, until Michael used examples). He asked what was going on for him (David wanted Michael to get the right answers and make good use of the short meeting time. He also had a mindset that hierarchy was the determinant of who needed to speak). Michael coached David by asking open-ended questions, challenging his mindset, providing feedback and David left the conversation with clear actions he would do next time.

If Michael had not 1) observed the dynamic 2) addressed it in the initial meeting 3) followed up to address it again in the next meeting, the behaviors would never have been addressed. **In a truly high performing organization, addressing behaviors and holding others accountable does not only fall solely upon hierarchical lines. It requires courage, commitment and curiosity from everyone, regardless of reporting lines, to engage in real, candid conversations that result in everyone feeling safe to be their best selves and help others do the same.**

Behaviors of Inclusive ALLIES:

The list below highlights core leadership behaviors allies actively practice to support, include and advance others. You can be an ally to anyone - it doesn't have to be solely your direct report, though that is the most common. High performance leaders look within and across the organization for people they can support and with whom they can build a stronger network.



ADVOCATE

1. **Ensure meaningful work and opportunities are shared and advocate where you see an imbalance.**

- ❑ *“OFFICE HOUSEWORK” refers to the typical roles often filled by women and people of color that can be anything from taking notes, writing up minutes, scheduling meetings, dealing with the coffee, etc. Never assume people like doing these types of tasks and ensure they are evenly distributed.*
- ❑ *Talent reviews and selection processes are areas where bias is often rampant in spite of all the unconscious bias training many managers have had. The difference is made in how you advocate effectively during calibration meetings and selection / promotion discussions. BE WILLING TO HAVE THE HARD CONVERSATIONS, share the data, ask tough questions.*
- ❑ *Examples: If you are male and are asked to speak in an all-male lineup, point it out, push back or decline. Ensure your presentation materials show people from a variety of backgrounds, gender identities and abilities.*

2. **Amplifies the individual as the originator of ideas and/or defers to them as expert or decision-maker.**

- ❑ *REPEAT A GOOD POINT OR GIVE CREDIT, especially when it is not heard or listened to by others. Ensures others in group meetings hear and consider the person’s input and ideas. Avoid “MANSPLAINING” (the explanation of something by a man, typically to a woman, in a manner regarded as condescending or patronizing) or “MANTERRUPTING” (unnecessary interruption of a woman by a man).*
- ❑ *It also includes positioning them as the decision maker to others inside and outside the company. Many women describe not being seen as the point of contact or decision maker and an ally can position them or reposition themselves as not being the person on point.*
- ❑ *Examples: As Jen mentioned....since Karyn is the final decision maker she is on point and will be handling this from here This question is better answered by Joan*

3. **Strategically creates change through actions & behaviors, both in specific examples and challenging overall assumptions and impacting processes at a broader level.**

- ❑ *QUESTION ASSUMPTIONS AND PROCESSES in your specific organization through data that challenge inequality. Don’t leave it to HR to raise the questions.*
- ❑ *Examples: We have passed this person over for promotion before while we have promoted xyz people without the same qualifications or track record and we need to hold ourselves accountable to rectify this ...Our numbers reflect inequality in the rates of furloughs and promotions and I’d like us to gather and analyze the data with the right team members to uncover areas in our process that might be perpetuating inequality.*

LISTEN

1. **Interested in others and their ideas, value and contribution they bring to the table.**

- ② *This sounds absurdly basic and happens to be at the root of why we don't fully engage with those who are different from us. We often hear/see things we have been programmed to hear/see. It's why when we learn a new word we hear it everywhere when we never noticed it before. LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND is an intention to set.*
- ② *This begins with the ASSUMPTION that GOOD IDEAS can (and often do) come from different people with different experiences and perspectives who may not be at the same level or be the typical "go to" person.*

2. **Seek and request the other's input, point of view, or feedback both in one-on-one and group meetings.**

- ② *It requires you to be INTERESTED in others, not focused on being INTERESTING. This subtle difference is difficult because most leaders have been rewarded for knowing the answer, being right and solving issues their entire careers. Many leaders privately question if they don't provide the answers and solve the problems then what value do they bring? (answer - that's leadership!)*
- ② *Being CURIOUS and RECEPTIVE to others sounds easy. It is surprisingly one of the most important and least practiced skills done well by any leader. It requires that you - and the group - are open to hear and consider others' input and ideas which is challenging, especially when it's different from your own. Remember, listening does NOT mean you are agreeing. Bonus points: PARAPHRASE or SUMMARIZE what you heard especially if feedback and/or if you disagree!*
- ② *Give the floor, ensuring you and others DON'T INTERRUPT. When you agree, support their ideas and give credit. When you disagree, CHECK TO ENSURE UNDERSTANDING, ask follow up questions for clarification. Sounds simple and, due to confirmation bias, we are usually most open to the ideas that are similar to ours and often disregard much of the rest. Receive the information, especially if information is new or challenging that may help you grow in awareness.*
- ② *Examples: LISTEN 80% of the time (notice how much you are literally talking) ... PARAPHRASE (your experience being in team meetings is that) SUMMARIZE what I do that is unhelpful and what you need from me is to) Let's hear Deirdre's point of view ... What feedback do you have for me? What is the biggest thing we need to do differently going forward?*

3. **Show empathy to others, which will improve communication and build trust.**

- *Level 1 (cognitive empathy) is putting yourself in another's shoes, taking their perspective. Level 2 (emotional empathy) is emotionally connecting as if you feel or "catch" the emotions. Level 3 (compassionate empathy) is feeling others pain and taking (or helping them take) action, which is the most powerful empathy allies can demonstrate.*
- *Examples: Asking, listening to understand and demonstrating empathy often occur in listening tours or roundtable discussions leaders host or in 1:1 conversations.*

LEARN

1. **Start with self, by educating yourself, gathering input, learning about and challenging your own (and others') biases.**

- ② *Most people default to solving and fixing, by taking actions that demonstrate commitment. While that is noble and needed, it is critical to start with a willingness to learn what you “DON'T KNOW YOU DON'T KNOW.” Proactively taking initiative to discover what others need and what you need to learn is critical.*
- ② *Requests DIRECT, CANDID FEEDBACK AND COACHING. High performance leaders see their relationships as a “Two-Way Street” as we discussed on page 4. They seek what they have been doing or not doing and ask what they can do differently. Some companies have “Reverse Mentoring” because often mentors or allies who are open to this kind of learning get just as much, if not more, as they give.*
- ② *Examples: You seek resources in the learning style that works best (books, articles, videos, etc., classes, etc.) Check out this [link](#) for resources for a good place to start.*

2. **Get comfortable feeling uncomfortable by stepping out of your comfort zone 10% more than you do today.**

- ② *As the Catalyst [study](#) defines Courage: you put personal interests aside to achieve what needs to be done; you act on convictions and principles even when it requires PERSONAL RISK-TAKING. Let people know it's hard, awkward, uncomfortable - and you're willing to choose growth over comfort. It will humanize you, build empathy (and respect) from them and encourage them to do the same . You will be a role model leader by admitting it.*
- ② *High performing leaders are rarely comfortable, and it's a muscle they consistently practice, which can feel overwhelming. Make it doable by practicing THE 10% RULE. You can do anything 10% more or less than today. Seek opportunities to step out of your comfort zone at least 10% (or more!) in every interaction with people different from you AND with people who are similar to you - peers, boss, and other people with whom you have influence.*
- ② *Examples: host the team meetings to open up the discussion you don't know how to have about race; engage with women on your team to explore the biggest challenges they are facing right now; engage with people in uncomfortable conversations that focuses on “how” not “what” they're doing*

3. **Demonstrate humility, which builds trust, empowers others and prioritizes the Enterprise over functional self-interest.**

- ② *What is humility? In short, having a GROWTH MINDSET (see page 3).*
- ② *Catalyst research shows humility as a KEY LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTE linked to inclusion, and Jennifer Paylor from IBM cites the most important HLB's (humility leadership behaviors) in creating an agile organization [here](#).*
- ② *Examples: learning about and understanding your strengths and weaknesses, and recognizing those of others; admitting mistakes; actively seeking and learning from feedback and others' points of view; asking for help; acknowledging you can't do it on your own; focusing on the bigger purpose and moving the focus from “I” to “we”.*



INCLUDE

1. **Invite the individual to formal and informal meetings, gatherings, and/or opportunities that can benefit them and/or the team.**

- ❑ *One of the common concerns is the difficulty women and people of color experience staying visible and connected, exacerbated by remote working conditions and constant meetings. Check your initial inclination to be efficient (the “COST”) with the potential positive impact (the “BENEFIT”) on the person and/or the meeting by including them.*
- ❑ *When in person, invite them to SIT AT THE TABLE vs on the sidelines. When working remotely, invite them to participate BY VIDEO if it is a video meeting and if they can, give them a heads up ahead of time for the key meetings where video is recommended.*
- ❑ *Examples: Present at leadership team meetings, have them contribute to materials and give them credit, have them attend meetings to cross-train or share their input.*

2. **Solicit the person’s input when they have expertise or experience.**

- ❑ *If they might hold back or not fully engage, REMIND THEM AHEAD OF TIME why you want them there, the value they bring, and give them license to fully participate. If you can’t do this ahead of time or if people might be unclear about why they are in the meeting, SAY IT PUBLICLY at the beginning of the meeting, if it is appropriate and will position the person to engage more fully. You may not need to do this every time with everyone. Remember, it is common for people to hold back if they don’t feel they belong (even if you think they do).*
- ❑ *TREAT THEM AS THE EXPERT. Ask them questions and seek their input. Oftentimes they are closer to the issue and have valuable recommendations if you include and listen to them. It can be intimidating for less senior people to attend a leadership team meeting they are not used to joining. It is common for questions to sound interrogating and LT members can often be unconsciously dismissive. Watch for what is/is not being solicited, and how.*
- ❑ *Examples: High performing leadership teams that need to lead through unprecedented levels of uncertainty are increasingly including people closest to the data to help plan and solve. Leverage people whom you may not have tapped for insight.*

3. **Include yourself by attending meetings / gatherings to learn and show support.**

- ❑ *There are many opportunities to show support, such as women’s leadership conferences, employee resource group meetings, diversity and inclusion committees, and more. Leaders often don’t feel they can attend and often don’t ask. In the past, those gatherings were more exclusive and that is changing. In most venues all leaders are welcome, though make sure that is the case. FIND OUT WHEN THEY ARE AND ASK IF YOU CAN ATTEND.*
- ❑ *NOTICE HOW YOU FEEL being in the minority at these gatherings and remember this is how women and others might feel a majority of the time. Attend to listen and learn, not to be the expert.*
- ❑ *Examples: I have seen men in women’s leadership courses dominate the room, be the expert, and talk twice as much as others.*



ENABLE

1. **You empower people to develop and excel.**

- ② *DELEGATE responsibility on key, high-visibility projects. Stay in the loop by coaching and mentoring as needed.*
- ② *Hold them ACCOUNTABLE by demonstrating confidence and by holding them responsible for performance they can control.*
- ② *Examples: proactively seek their participation in special projects and give them responsibility that will continue to develop them.*

2. **Create opportunities to network informally with or be visible to senior leaders.**

- ② *Include DEVELOPMENT FOCUS in the majority of your meetings, or create a cadence by which you will check in. There are three kinds: CAREER (where you want to be in 5 years), NETWORK (stakeholders) development and INDIVIDUAL development (what they need to start/stop to increase current effectiveness).*
- ② *Help them make a list of KEY STAKEHOLDERS within the organization. Most people focus on their current work and forget that building and maintaining a strong network enterprise-wide (and outside) the company is critical.*
- ② *Examples: Have them create an individual development plan. Included can be their “Network Plan”. This is where they (with your input) create a plan for relationship-building with key stakeholders. Create a strategy regarding each stakeholder. Some need an introduction if they haven’t met, some need a plan to develop a stronger relationship, some can be identified as possible mentors or sponsors. Include aspirational career check-ins.*

3. **Demonstrate flexibility to proactively support them in managing priorities.**

- ② *Having CANDID CONVERSATIONS about fears and concerns is vital. Declaring a judgement-free zone and ensuring people can be authentic around you is key. Staying current with how people are feeling and managing their lives is always important, now more than ever.*
- ② *Some people might be struggling with childcare or other commitments. Work with them PROACTIVELY TO GET THEIR NEEDS MET especially as changing conditions with school and childcare emerge.*
- ② *Examples: Many of the people currently struggling with work / life priorities need coaching from their managers and team members to prioritize, say no, and identify what they can do differently about how they usually work.*



SPONSOR

1. **Hold self, peers, and other leaders accountable for supporting and elevating leaders**

- ② *Assessing yourself against this list of inclusive ally behaviors; asking for input from others around you; clarifying and (publicly) declaring what behaviors you will proactively address.*
- ② *Engaging your peers, directs and others in their assessment of their ally behaviors; holding people accountable to make changes and share progress.*
- ② *Examples: You can use this behavioral list to assess your (and others') starting point.*

2. **Recommend and provide meaningful opportunities, clear and actionable feedback, and stretch assignments.**

- ② *Stretch assignments, roles and responsibilities require knowing people's strengths and weaknesses and being WILLING TO THINK OUT OF THE BOX for what could help someone grow. Most leaders gravitate towards others with whom they have the most rapport (i.e. people who look like them). To seek others means you have to know them, consider them and be willing to help them.*
- ② *Research shows women and people of color do not receive clear and actionable feedback and often receive vague comments, if any. One reason often cited is because the person who needs to step out of their comfort zone is the person providing the feedback, which is a reminder to GET COURAGEOUS and tell people what they need to hear.*

3. **Build intentional relationships that utilize mentoring, coaching AND sponsoring.**

- ② *MENTORING is advising based on experience and position. When leaders mentor they fix, solve, provide advice, act as a sounding board and provide insight into culture. Mentors can also help clarify understanding of leadership expectations. COACHING is when leaders ask questions that can enable the individual to have a breakthrough, shift a perspective or at least get clear on actions they identify. SPONSORING can include mentoring and coaching and most importantly, is about advocating for the individual. These are senior leaders or key influencers who are willing to put their social capital on the line to stake their reputation on the person, when they are and are not in the room. Both coaching and sponsoring require high trust which must be built and maintained over time.*
- ② *ADVOCATING FOR SPONSORSHIP to be built into mentoring and other leadership mechanisms is the sign of true sponsors. If it's not there, they advocate to ensure it gets created, because they know sponsorship creates the single biggest difference in the advancement of underrepresented talent.¹*
- ② *Examples: Proactively volunteering to be a mentor and build sponsorship relationships; asking what mentoring & sponsorship programs exist; advocating to create programs when they don't yet exist.*

¹https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sponsorship-a-powerful-ca_b_12136476#:~:text=Sponsorship%20is%20a%20leadership%20development,with%20the%20pathway%20to%20leadership%3B

Summary: Being a High Performance, Inclusive Ally

Being a high performance, inclusive ally requires being willing to look in the mirror, starting with yourself first. Self-awareness is vital. You can only build awareness when you get curious about what you know, what you don't know, and what you don't know you don't know. High performers model a growth mindset and are willing to step out of their comfort zones to be better, even if they think they already are.

Leaders start with the intention to be an ally through building self-awareness and a roadmap. They invite others along: they request input (and help) and involve stakeholders above, laterally and below because they know they can't be successful alone.

To become a high performing, inclusive ally, you must be willing to get curious and accurate about how you see your own behaviors and how others view them in you. Start by taking an inventory of yourself in these areas and then engaging others. Be open and curious, and remind yourself to go for progress, not perfection.

When you see the list of ALLIES behaviors, ask yourself:

- *How clear are you on what these behaviors look like when you are practicing them?*
- *Which behaviors come naturally to you?*
- *What are the actions you don't unconsciously take that would be useful to focus on?*

As you reflect on your own leadership, consider:

- *What is your **top strength** as an inclusive leader? Be specific about the **one thing** you do best that helps your direct reports feel seen, heard, and included.*
- *What is the most important tangible action you could take to be an even more **inclusive leader**?*



If you would like to explore what it means to be a high performing, inclusive ally or what you could do to be a BOLD leader who engages with others to be inclusive allies, please reach out to [Gisele Garcia Shelley](#) to explore actions you can take and get more resources that will help you.