allyship fatigue:
the new syndrome that impacts inclusion

abstract

Allies to LGBTQ+ community is a common practice observed in organizations across. If we understand the reasons why employees sign up as allies, these could be internal or external. Internal is the one that emerges from a person's own interest in inclusion (allies by choice) or external, one that helps the person portray a certain image within the organization or ecosystem (allies by force). Talking to the LGBTQ+ community at work, we note that they expect allies to do more than just volunteering for PRIDE activities, and campaigns. They want allies to be their true advocates. Do too many conversations around inclusion and discussions in common forums put pressure on allies? Some say yes, and they term it as allyship fatigue.

"Imagine someone saying on social media that I am not a feminist. Everyone will troll them. Similarly, if someone says that I am homophobic or queerphobic in this world, they're looked down on."
- Ruj, a 33-year-old non-binary/gay individual leading strategic planning and growth at an IT MNC

This is the voice of Ruj, talking of how sometimes, support for the LGBTQ+ community in corporate India can be superficial. Ruj works in a multinational company, where terms like allies and advocates are commonly used. While such organizations take pride in their inclusivity measures, what we hear from the community is very different. Sandipan Kushary, a 25 years old open and proud Queer leading Mobbera Foundation and an IT professional in Hyderabad has a similar point of view.

He says, "People just say they are allies. Ally doesn't mean you've simply heard about it. Allyship comes when you spread the word or when you see discrimination, you raise the voice."

The concept of being an ally is then, not as simple as it sounds. Organizations at various stages of inclusion have allyship programs in place.

Employees are signing up as allies, perhaps also carrying pronouns in their signatures and profiles, participating in PRIDE marches and activities; yet, the LGBTQ+ community feels that allyship as a term needs to be understood and demonstrated better.

When Randstad conducted a study titled 'Inclusion Without Exception: Where Where India Inc. stands with respect to the LGBTQ+ community', the responses from the LGBTQ+ community as well as industry leaders, and neutral entities working in the space of LGBTQ+ inclusion, uncovered a new perspective on allyship.

allies by force or
allies by choice

What makes an employee sign up to be an ally? There are multiple perspectives that emerge when we understand the reasons from the experiences of LGBTQ+ community members, corporates and neutral entities that are working in the LGBTQ+ inclusion space.

> We observe that the reason to be an ally could be internal, one that emerges from a person's own interest in inclusion or external, one that helps the person portray a certain image within the organization or ecosystem.

Consider a regular workplace set up. If the organization demonstrates deep commitment towards inclusivity and demonstrates inclusion through communication and processes, the employees will also follow suit. There will be more sign-ups for allies, and allies will not only voluntarily participate in inclusion-related initiatives, but will also advocate for their colleagues, when required. In this scenario, what we have are 'allies by choice'. These colleagues may display willingness to acquire more knowledge about the subject, the language to be used and display curiosity to know more. Curiosity, not intrusion, is the beginning of the journey to become an ally.

Vishal, a cis-gay man working for Syngenta, Pune explains that it is natural to be curious about topics that are less talked about and if that curiosity is in a 'good way', it only helps the environment at work and also makes the person belonging from the LGBTQ+ community feel welcomed.

> Often the beginning of understanding the context of the mindset of LGBTQ+ colleagues is curiosity.

However, it needs to evolve from there. He says, "My colleagues have never seen a gay couple. They have often invited my boyfriend for dinner parties. Yes, they are curious but I would say it's in a good way." These positive sentiments and the push that emerges from the culture of the organization result in creating allies who talk and walk the cause. However, the path that allies take when the initial curiosity gets satisfied is where the difference between being an ally by choice and by force emerges.
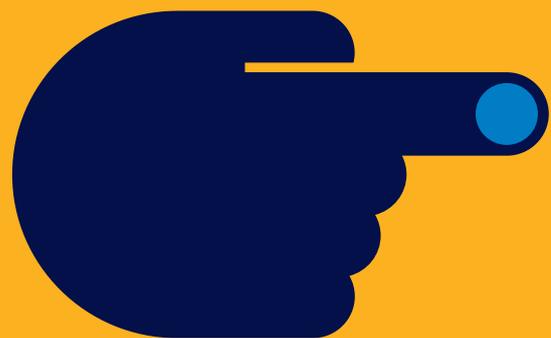
You may find co-workers at the workplace who look at allyship as an externally driven concept. Since the organization and the leadership are talking about allyship, they believe that showcasing their allyship helps in their personal branding and career progress. These are allies by force. There is no interest or intent to create provisions for the members of the community. They will comply with the mandatory requirements for allyship (for e.g. sharing pronouns, signing up as an ally publicly) but are not willing to be true advocates of change. For instance, they would not question subtle homophobic behaviour.

> For some here, being an ally is only a badge for positioning themselves better within the organization and in their professional circles.

Elaborating on this phenomenon, Rakesh, a 29 years old cis gay man working in a company in Bangalore says, "It hasn't changed in terms of the attitude of the people. It has changed with respect to the avenues or opportunities that they got to showcase that they are allies."

However, members of the LGBTQ+ community who are in the workforce distinguish between these two groups very starkly. Through behavior, involvement, and actions, it becomes clear who is an ally by force and who by choice.

Abhishek, a queer person working in consulting in Mumbai explains the type of allies seen at the workplace and says, "Young colleagues are usually sensitive to LGBTQIA+ matters due to social media, senior leaders support it to attract the best talent. But real, lasting change needs to fully involve middle management: where inclusive policies on hiring, employee relations, and performance management really play out."

what is allyship fatigue?

When organizations indulge in more conversations around inclusion of any kind, they require more employees to sign up for various initiatives and make time for inclusion activities. We observe that there are certain organizations that have campaigns, initiatives and processes in place for driving inclusion. Hence, the culture demands this time, and allies do not feel the pressure to extract time from their functional responsibilities toward activities that are considered 'voluntary'. Explaining how the concept of allyship works at the Expedia Group, Pallavi Tandon, Senior Manager, Global Learning, Expedia Group, says, "We are stripping people of their titles and their roles and as human beings asking them to volunteer time to train others in the areas of allyship."

On the other hand, there are organizations who have the concept of allyship in place, however, no structured processes to drive the activities. Allies show up for inclusion initiatives, but members of the community expect more than just attendance of the allies. The expectation of the community is not only to be present for inclusion initiatives, but also talk about the same to others, advocate, and be associated with larger campaigns around LGBTQ+ inclusion at work. The weight of the expectations leads to 'allyship fatigue'. This means that the employee starts feeling the pressure to be an ally and advocate. This leads to allyship fatigue.

Annith Infanta is a lesbian woman employed with a global MNC. She says that with an increased effort by organizations to be more inclusive, allies are feeling the pressure. She says, "To be my ally, the person has to speak up on my behalf even when I am not around. They need to have difficult conversations. They need to handle questions about their orientation. What is the drive that an ally has for standing up for the community? They might start because they are inspired. But once you start facing stigma, the interest level, activeness comes down."

When allyship fatigue sets in, then the narrative shifts from the LGBTQ+ community to the allies' community. The issues discussed are no longer about LGBTQ+ inclusion, but about the problems that employees face to be allies. In common forums, allies talk about the difficulties they face in being advocates for the community, and the time they are required to spend for inclusion initiatives. They discuss the effect of being an ally on their mental health and allyship fatigue. Talking about this, Annith says, "The spaces are already limited and those spaces are also utilized by allies."

what LGBTQ+ members expect from allies at work

"I have my doubts with the word 'ally' we have borrowed from the West. It's as simple as treating the person in the right way irrespective of what their background is. Allyship has been too formalized. It should be more informal and friendly. Space becomes safe by the people there. It's important for people to understand and empathize so that anybody feels free to be themselves." says Poornima Sukumar, Founder, Aravani Art Project, an organization that spreads inclusion awareness through art.

As we interacted with the members of the community through our study, 'Inclusion Without Exception: Where India Inc. stands with respect to the LGBTQ+ community', we realised that it is the immediate team members and managers that matter the most, when it comes to feeling included by the LGBTQ+ community.

Whether by their actions, behaviour or advocacy, if there are allies within the team, the micro environment for members of the LGBTQ+ community becomes safer. Considering this as the baseline, every ally can do the following

to reach a level where there is no formalization required, and inclusion becomes a way of life:

- Understand the language and the terms

The LGBTQ+ umbrella is wide and to be an ally who can strike conversations with members from the community, it is important to understand the pronouns and terms to use. Dr. L Ramakrishnan, Vice President, SAATHII, a national NGO headquartered in Chennai shares a very interesting observation. He says, "Companies mostly know how to deal with a person from such communities coming in & starting fresh but not how to handle someone they have already been working with who just came out." A large part of this awkwardness is behavioral and can only be addressed through education and sensitization of allies. "The mindset shift has happened though in relatively small, baby steps. Be it with having open conversations or speaking up.," Suresh Ramdas, a cis gay man, working as Global Training Lead in a multinational company in Bangalore and winner of Mr. Gay India 2019

- Don't just listen, share too!

Members of the community expect allies also to talk about their sexuality as openly as they would expect them to share. A two-way communication always helps in establishing trust.

A lot of people from the LGBTQ+ community go through personal struggles and trauma. One way of making them feel comfortable about sharing is to express their own vulnerabilities, and not pressurize them in any way to open up. "They'd say I am there for you but they wouldn't face any questions about their own sexuality. There is a lot of support that people are willing to offer in private spaces, not necessarily stand up for you, speak up for you.", says Annith Infanta, a lesbian woman employed with a global MNC.

- Make inclusion check a part of your personal hiring checklist

All employees at the workplace are involved in decisions around hiring at some point in their careers. As an ally, make sure that hiring for 'inclusion quotient' is a part of your checklist. This will not only help if you have an LGBTQ+ member in your team, but at an overall level, it will also help in influencing the thoughts of other members of the team positively. Talking about the merits of this aspect, Leena N, a 36-year-old queer person heading strategy and ops for an IT healthcare company says, "One of the things that we've done right is we hire well. We examine how people feel about these things at the interview stage that allows us to bring in people who are modern and liberal already."

- ## Call out homophobic transphobic behaviors at work

   "If you hear some sort of homophobic, transphobic comments, maybe in the workplace or virtual workplaces or the social media or the WhatsApp groups within your office space, then how do you handle it without coming across as insulting someone or reprimanding them.", asks Srini Ramaswamy, Chief Evangelist & Co-Founder, Pride Circle. The LGBTQ+ community looks at allies at work to call out non-inclusive behaviors of any kind. This provides a sense of safety to the LGBTQ+ members at work. It also contributes to creating an inclusive culture at an overall level.

- ## Use your privilege well

   As allies, co-workers and managers are in the position to influence other new team members. Keeping the agenda of inclusion on priority, taking time out for PRIDE-related campaigns, actively participating in awareness sessions, and normalizing conversations around inclusion are basic expectations of the community members from allies. "What I envision for the future is embracement, not just acceptance for the sake of acceptance.", says Tanvi, a transwoman working for a financial services company.

As more and more organizations begin to understand the concept of inclusion beyond gender, we observe changes.

The ultimate destination is to reach a space where LGBTQ+ inclusion is normalized, but there are many layers of culture and society to it, beyond the workplace. For now, we see change and go with it as a step in the right direction.

"Presence of LGBTQ+ among us is normalized now rather than being science fiction. It's something that exists, and people acknowledge it" says Arpit Ishmael Mudgal, a 22-year-old bi-sexual/queer leading Brand & Creative services at MBAtrek in Gurgaon, with the hope that it will forward and upward from here.