



Practising Active LGBT+ Allyship



Being an ally doesn't necessarily mean you fully understand what it feels like to be oppressed. It means you're taking on the struggle as your own.

The Guide to Allyship



Look for where you're privileged and make use of that to help make things more inclusive and more equal.

Interviewee, *Exploring the Workplace for LGBT+ Physical Scientists* report



introduction



This guide is an introduction to developing good allyship practices. The Institute of Physics, Royal Astronomical Society, and Royal Society of Chemistry report *Exploring the Workplace for LGBT+ Physical Scientists* reveals that 28% of LGBT+ respondents, and almost half of all transgender respondents, have at some point considered leaving their workplace because of the climate or discrimination towards LGBT+ people. Effective allyship is a crucial ingredient in combatting this discrimination and creating more welcoming environments.

Building inclusive and diverse scientific workplaces requires us to use our own privilege, to support marginalised people in the struggle towards ending oppression in our community. Although this guide focuses on LGBT+ issues, its principles can be applied more generally too. It's also important for all of us, regardless of whether or not we belong to a particular minority group, to recognise that marginalised communities are diverse and varied. All of us are learning, and being part of a given community does not automatically insulate us from the potential to harm one another.

Use this guide to facilitate an honest and empathetic culture of 'calling in'. Calling in (as opposed to 'calling out') begins from an assumption of good faith and views instances of harmful behaviour not as moments for judgement and condemnation, but as learning opportunities to bring one another into a better understanding.

Allyship is not an identity label to be awarded or withheld, but a continuous process of building relationships based on trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalised people. Practising good allyship creates a more welcoming environment, not only for LGBT+ scientists but for everyone.

The tips in this resource are aimed at any individual looking to develop their own practice and understanding of allyship, and support LGBT+ colleagues. To learn more about how you can use your role at work to make positive structural change, see our resource on [LGBT+ inclusivity](#) for employers and managers.

positive accountability

Expect to make mistakes

- Begin from the assumption that you know very little. Think of this as a reason to get involved and ask questions, rather than a reason not to.
- Approach any situation as a learning opportunity, rather than a possibility to get it wrong. Making mistakes is an essential part of growing and strengthening our capacity for allyship.
- When someone raises an issue with something you've said or done, don't think of it as a criticism. Instead, understand it as an expression of their trust in you to listen, be understanding, and make a change. Appreciate and value the labour of those who take the time to correct you, and thank them.

Commit to self-educate

- Proactively seek out LGBT+ perspectives and educative resources, focusing particularly on underrepresented identities.
- Recognise that having the same conversations over and over can be emotionally difficult for LGBT+ people and might make them feel as though they have to justify their identity.
- Ask questions respectfully – understand that no individual owes you an answer or an explanation.

Recognise your own privilege

Privilege: *A set of advantages afforded to particular groups, based on systems of unequal societal treatment. For example, non-LGBT+ people generally experience privilege related to having their sexual orientation and gender identity treated as the norm by society. See the full glossary.*

- None of us are beginning from a neutral or objective place, and if we think we are it's usually because we're in a position treated as 'default' by society as a whole.
- Recognise your privileged position in a genuine way, ie really understand how it may shape your perspective and biases.
- Be aware that conversations or events that may seem trivial to you might be very impactful, in both positive and negative ways, for people who experience exclusion based on their identity.



My feeling is there's nothing to lose by getting involved. Always be ready to apologise if you say something wrong or you do something wrong. I'm white, I'm male, I'm straight, I'm becoming grey-haired now. I've got all those signifiers of privilege. I've recognized that the best thing I can do is use that to change things so that those bits of privilege matter less in the future... look for where you're privileged and make use of that to help make things more inclusive and more equal.



How to be called out/in

- Focus on remedying the situation, and on the person affected. If you have feelings of embarrassment or guilt, put them aside for now.
- Take time separately to process your own reaction if necessary. This might happen alone, or together with someone unconnected with the person affected. Ideally this should be someone non-LGBT+, to avoid displacing the emotional load onto someone who may find it heavier to carry.
- It's ok not to engage immediately. If you're not sure about what someone is saying, go away and take some time to learn more and consider before revisiting the conversation – this can avoid a situation unnecessarily turning into a debate.

“That term you just used is actually offensive.”

DO – “Thanks for letting me know; I apologise; I’ll take the time to read up on this and ensure I don’t use inappropriate terminology again”.

DON’T – “Explain to me how it’s offensive? I’m not homophobic! I would never say anything to offend anyone. You’re misunderstanding me”.



“Oh no - I used the wrong pronouns for a colleague.”

DO – “Rowan said that he - sorry, I mean, that *she* will write the report...”.

DON’T – “Rowan said that he - oh my god, I’m so sorry, oh no, I’m such an idiot, please forgive me, it was a mistake, I feel terrible!”



Trans people overall reported a much stronger feeling than other groups that policies were not inclusive of their needs, that their co-workers were not able to have considered conversations about trans issues, and that simple indicators of respect, such as using the correct pronouns, were not used.



REPORT STATISTIC

49%

of all respondents agreed that there was a lack of awareness of LGBT+ issues from their co-workers.

Exploring the Workplace for LGBT+ Physical Scientists report



being an advocate

Keep an eye out

- Educate yourself on the structural issues LGBT+ people can face in the workplace (start with this toolkit).
- Look out for where policies, facility provision, etc might disadvantage LGBT+ people, even if it's not something that affects you. Are there gender-neutral bathrooms in your department? Do your organisation's policies treat unmarried or civil partners equally to spouses? Does your workplace have a policy specifically addressing LGBT+ dignity at work?
 - Be ready to speak up for change.

Keep an ear out

- Be aware of LGBT+ issues in the news/current events – research shows that this can impact significantly on LGBT+ people's wellbeing.
- Speak up on important issues (e.g. on social media) and amplify LGBT+ voices and ways to act (e.g. petitions).
- Actively suggest ways for your organisation to use their voice on issues where possible.

Offer your expertise/skills/time

- Take part in or help set up networks, events, mentoring schemes, etc
- Take opportunities to ask LGBT+ colleagues if there's anything that could be changed to make life easier in your organisation that they don't feel comfortable taking on themselves.



“

When I was hired, my line manager asked me about my preferred pronouns. Since I was very open about being transgender, he did what he could to ensure that the rest of my department and other co-workers also knew about my pronouns. People often still use the wrong pronouns, but sometimes they get it right, and that is probably thanks to my line manager.

”

Interviewee, *Exploring the Workplace for LGBT+ Physical Scientists* report



Here are some suggestions for practical ways in which you can help:

- Put the posters in this toolkit up in your workplace.
- Circulate these resources to your colleagues.
 - Share petitions supporting LGBT+ issues on social media.
 - Ask your LGBT+ colleagues how they're doing and offer a supportive ear if they need one.
 - Put your pronouns in your email signature and specify them when you verbally introduce yourself.
 - Contact senior staff or site managers and suggest that the bathrooms in your building be made gender neutral.
 - Take the lead on organising organisational or department statements in support of LGBT+ people.
 - Initiate conversations about commemorating certain dates - like Pride month (June), but also [International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia](#) (17 May), [Bi Visibility Day](#) (23 September), [Intersex Awareness Day](#) (26 October), [Asexual Awareness Week](#) (fourth week of October), and [Transgender Day of Remembrance](#) (20 November).
- Contact your workplace's LGBT+ network and offer to make them a website, help them organise a fundraiser, or escalate any concerns they have to your superiors.
- Ask managers to organise training provided by LGBT+ organisations.
- Encourage your colleagues to replace 'ladies and gentlemen' with a more inclusive option ('colleagues', 'everyone').
- Keep your eyes open for exclusionary language (such as 'he' or 'she' or restrictive gender options) in your workplace's policies, systems, or promotional materials, and raise it with the relevant person or department.
- Call the head of your committee 'chairperson' instead of 'chairman'.
- Make yourself visible as someone LGBT+ people can go to for support, e.g. via wearing a rainbow lanyard or putting a sticker in your office window.



self-reflection

Recognise

- Unconscious bias training can show us our biases, but it's also important to become aware of how our language and other habits reflect societal biases and challenge these within ourselves.
- All of us are raised with vocabularies and attitudes shaped by a society that marginalises LGBT+ people. What reflects on us as people is whether we work to combat this within ourselves.
- It can also be beneficial to think about your own experiences, even if you don't identify as LGBT+. How have you been affected by assumptions made about you or behaviours and roles expected of you based on gender, sexuality, relationships or appearance?

Read up

- Research microaggressions – small-scale comments or actions that can build up to create a hostile environment for marginalised people.
- Seek out things LGBT+ people have written about the effects that unintentionally discriminatory language or misguided assumptions can have on them.
- Find out what kinds of language might be harmful that you didn't know about, or that you've used before without realising.
- Pay particular attention to experiences relating to less represented identities within the LGBT+ umbrella, such as bisexuality, asexuality, and non-binary genders.

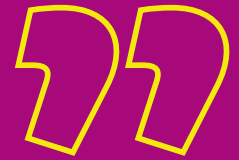


Participants felt these issues arose because of lack of thought on their colleagues' part, rather than outright maliciousness, but the damage is the same.





Throughout the interviews, participants came back to the idea of “death by a thousand cuts” repeatedly, talking about how “harmful humour” was often a norm in their workplaces.



**Exploring the Workplace for
LGBT+ Physical Scientists report**



Alter

- Make a conscious effort to do things differently in the future.
- Correct yourself if you realise you’ve said or done something potentially harmful, and proactively apologise to anyone who might have been affected (not just those you know to be LGBT+!).
- The report highlighted offensive humour as a particular source of discomfort. Before you make or laugh at a joke, ask yourself ‘why is this funny?’ - and if the answer is at the expense of someone’s identity, reconsider.

Some common actions that may cause unintentional harm:

- Assuming the genders of people’s partners or spouses, or assuming someone’s sexuality based off of this alone (this can often erase identities such as bisexuality).
- Assuming you know what someone’s pronouns are based on their appearance.
- Outing LGBT+ people to others by treating their identity as a talking point, or by not keeping their personal information confidential.

- Trivialising LGBT+ experience or culture (“gay best friend”/“I wish I was a lesbian too so I wouldn’t have to put up with men!”/treating LGBT+ cultural events or spaces as photo opportunities).
- Stereotyping (“I didn’t realise lesbians wore makeup”/“you don’t look trans”/“he dresses so well he must be gay”).
- Using offensive or disrespectful terminology (“that’s so gay”/“she used to be a man”/“he was born female”).
- Asking invasive questions (“are you a top or a bottom?”/“have you had surgery?”/“what gender are you biologically?”/“what was your name before you transitioned?”).
- Telling LGBT+ people they’re “brave” just for existing.
- Bringing up LGBT+ political issues with LGBT+ colleagues, but not straight/cis colleagues.
- Erasing or misunderstanding certain LGBT+ identities (‘how do you know you’re bisexual if you’ve only dated one gender?’ / ‘how can you be asexual if you have a partner?’).
- Participating in offensive humour (finding nothing more hilarious than a man in a dress, using a fake ‘gay voice’, jokes about gender fluidity or pronouns).
- Referring to being LGBT+ as a ‘lifestyle’.



The actions that most commonly contribute to a hostile environment for LGBT+ people are frequently small but numerous. Often it is smaller, day-to-day interactions that can. These actions might seem inconsequential to the antagonist and might be unintentional, but they leave lasting impact on LGBT+ employees...



bystander intervention

Speak up

- Don't let inappropriate behaviour go unchallenged, including on a microaggression level. This might mean challenging behaviour directly, but it doesn't have to. If you're unable or not comfortable to speak out in a given situation, there are less confrontational ways of making sure harmful behaviour is addressed (see the 5 D's below).
- We're hard-wired to work as a social unit; if other people don't address something we're more likely to let it go too. We have to make a conscious choice to break through that wall. It's easy to convince ourselves we can't make a difference, but in truth we can – even just speaking up can send an important message of support to marginalised people.
- If an individual is the target of harmful behaviour, ask what they would like you to do and follow their lead. It's important to ensure the situation is made better, not worse, especially if the perpetrator is in a position of seniority.

Learn the 5 Ds of bystander intervention

- Different situations call for different responses, and you may feel more comfortable with certain methods of confrontation than with others. The important thing is to do something, not nothing. The 5 Ds can provide a framework to help think through your options.
- Distract/de-escalate:** intervene indirectly, such as by asking an unrelated question to redirect the discussion.
- Direct action:** address the issue head on – “that’s not a funny joke”/“actually, she uses she/her pronouns”.

Delay: revisit the issue later to offer support – this might be to someone who was affected, or it might be to the person whose behaviour was inappropriate. This is a good option if you think someone would respond better to being “called in” in a more private setting.

Delegate: flag the issue to someone in authority, or consult other members of your team to act together.

Document: keep a record of any incidents, however small.

Call ‘in’, not ‘out’

- Remember everyone is at different points in their learning journey, and the majority of harmful behaviour stems from ignorance rather than malice.
- It tends to be most productive to start with the assumption that someone just doesn't understand how their behaviour might be harmful, and invite them to learn.
- Listen actively to what they say in response: understanding where they're coming from can help you support them in doing better, and inform your allyship in future.
- Know where to draw the line though. If someone is clearly acting maliciously or refuses to hold themselves to account, escalate to an authority.

“

I'm trying to better recognise when my humour might be unintentionally harmful to minority groups, and I think the joke you made earlier perpetuated negative stereotypes about gay people.

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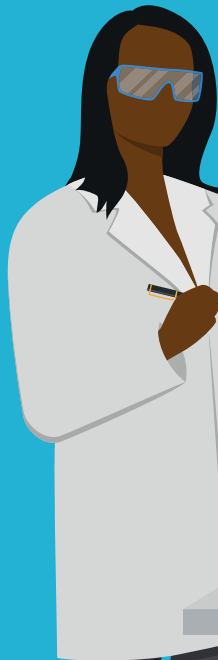
I noticed our boss referred to you with the wrong pronouns in our meeting this morning; would you be comfortable with me sending her an email to flag the mistake, and would you prefer me to verbally correct her straight away if it happens again?

”

“

- I don't understand why we need rainbow lanyards we're all scientists, sexuality shouldn't matter!*
- Actually, research shows that whether LGBT+ people feel supported in their identities at work makes a big difference to the science they're able to do. Straight people can't fully understand because we don't share the same experiences, but we should make sure to listen to LGBT+ scientists – I found the RSC/IOP/RAS report very helpful for this.*

”



A final golden rule

Always keep others' privacy and confidentiality in mind.

Never assume that someone's LGBT+ identity, or information relating to it, is public knowledge. Just because someone is 'out' to you as being LGBT+ doesn't mean you can assume that they are out to others. Ask what name and pronouns you should use for someone – or for their partner – around other groups of people, to ensure you don't unintentionally out them.

Even when someone is out as LGBT+, they may still want certain information that relates to their identity kept private; for example, many trans people do not want their *deadname* shared. As with the rest of the guidance in this resource, the most important principle is to ask, listen, and be considerate.



Taking concrete steps towards greater LGBT+ inclusivity is a key part of fostering diverse and welcoming scientific workplaces.

This resource is part of the Royal Society of Chemistry LGBT+ toolkit, which aims to tackle the key workplace issues faced by LGBT+ physical scientists. The toolkit builds on the findings of the 2019 report *Exploring the Workplace for LGBT+ Physical Scientists*, and includes resources to equip everyone to take part in positive change: employers, colleagues, and LGBT+ people.



Whoever you are, you can make a real difference towards LGBT+ inclusivity in science.

Find out more at rsc.li/lgbt-toolkit

To learn more about the terminology used in this resource, see our **Glossary**

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