

Case 9: Allyship

Abbey is a junior-level accountant at Golden Fischer, a mid-size accounting firm. One day, as she's eating lunch in the breakroom with some co-workers, her colleague, Scott, tells them that there's been a major car accident in town. He says a drunk driver hit three cars and that one person died and six others were taken to the hospital with serious injuries. "The intersection where the crash happened is really close to that reserve on the outskirts of town." Scott says. "I bet it was one of those people who live on that reserve. You know how they like to drink." Abbey is Indigenous and Scott's comment not only makes her uncomfortable but deeply hurts her. Abbey tells Scott how his comment made her feel, but Scott simply shrugs and tells her it was just a joke and that she's over-reacting.

When Scott leaves the breakroom, the others assure Abbey that the comment was inappropriate and that she was right to be upset. She feels better that the others recognize Scott's comment was wrong. Taylor, one of the co-workers who was there when Scott made his comment, approaches Abbey later that day and tells her that he would support her if she wanted to file a formal complaint with Human Resources (HR). Abbey talks to Ron, an HR advisor who thanks her for coming forward and tells her they'll deal with it.

A few days after she lodged her complaint, Ron asks to speak to her again. "HR wants to take this opportunity to educate employees on the bias and stigma surrounding Indigenous people," he says. Based on the timing of recent events, would you be comfortable with Golden Fischer hosting this sort of training?" Abbey is happy to move forward and loves the idea of educating her colleagues on this topic so no one else would have to experience what she did. "I know someone who would be open to coming to give a presentation on residential schools, generational trauma, and how organizations can create policies to support Indigenous employees," she tells Ron.

With the support of Ron, two other members of HR and three managers, Abbey organizes to have the guest speaker come give a presentation to the staff at Golden Fischer. She knows there are multiple Indigenous employees, and that this initiative could benefit them and the company's mission to create a more inclusive environment.

Abbey is excited about being a part of this initiative and is sure many people will be interested in attending, especially since her colleagues were so supportive during the initial incident with Scott in the breakroom. She posts flyers all over the office and receives permission to send an email invite to all staff. Because of scheduling conflicts between the guest speaker's availability and the firm's meeting times, the guest speaker is scheduled to speak at 5:00 p.m.—the very end of the workday. The invite was sent two weeks before the presentation so employees could organize their schedules and make arrangements to be available after work hours.

The day of the presentation, Abbey is speaking to Taylor while making coffee. Abbey tells him how excited she is for the guest speaker later that afternoon. Taylor seems confused. He had no idea there was a presentation that day. Abbey points to a flyer on a nearby wall and reminds him that an all-staff email had gone out two weeks ago. Taylor says he never saw the flyers and that the email

must have gone to his junk folder. Abbey asks if he will be able to attend, but Taylor says he can't. He already has concrete dinner plans. Abbey is disappointed, but she knew this was a risk of having an after-hours work event. Nevertheless, Taylor is just one person.

At the end of the day, Abbey walks into the presentation room to find only 10 chairs set up. She approaches one of the managers and asks why there are such a small number of chairs given the firm has at least 200 staff members. The manager tells her that only 10 people RSVP'd, "But maybe more people will show up," he tells her. "The room holds up to 100 people, and we have more chairs ready on standby, if needed."

As the chairs fill up, Abbey notices that the only people in attendance are Ron, the two other HR professionals and the three managers who helped organize the event, and a few of the firm's Indigenous employees. None of the senior leaders who are always talking about how inclusion is one of Golden Fischer's core values are in here. Neither are any of her co-workers who witnessed the breakroom incident with Scott. It doesn't even look like Scott was made to attend. While she appreciates those who did show up, she was hoping for a higher turn-out. When the talk is over, the few attendees thank Abbey for exposing them to such an enriching, informative presentation.

In the breakroom a few days after the presentation, Abbey asks some of her co-workers why they didn't attend. Some tell her they had no idea it was happening; others tell her they had other plans. During her weekly meeting with her manager, Abbey asks her why she didn't attend. Her manager responds, "I thought it was only for Indigenous staff members."

Questions:

- (1) Was it Abbey's responsibility to speak up regarding Scott's comment? Everyone else in the room knew the comment was inappropriate. Why didn't anybody say anything until after Scott left the room?
- (2) If Taylor thought Abbey should bring Scott's comment to Human Resources, why didn't he attend the presentation? Why is approaching Abbey only after the incident not considered strong allyship?
- (3) How would a strong ally have changed the course of this case? Consider actions that contribute to being a dedicated ally.
- (4) What are some of the risks of engaging in performative allyship?
- (5) What message is sent when only employees who identify as Indigenous attend the presentation? Is this type of presentation better suited for a solely Indigenous audience?
- (6) Where does the responsibility of an ally end in this situation? Is there a difference between practicing allyship and showing support?

Additional Resources for Case 9:

- What is Allyship? (Video by Lean In), [here](#)
- 3 ways to be a better ally in the workplace (TED Talk), [here](#)
- Guide to Allyship (open-source starter guide), [here](#)
- 10 Things Allies Can Do (resource by the YWCA Greater Harrisburg), [here](#)
- Anti-Racism and Allyship 7 Day Journey, [here](#)
- Allyship at Work (video by Pennsylvania Conference for Women), [here](#)
- Ally Bill of Responsibilities (resource for practicing allyship with Indigenous people), [here](#)
- The coin model of privilege and critical allyship: implications for health (journal article in BMC Public Health), [here](#)
- Privilege 101 (video by the University of Toronto) further describes the coin analogy mentioned above, [here](#)

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