

Ally Skills Workshop Facilitator's Guide

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Last updated: 2017-01-15

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Introduction

This is a guide for facilitators teaching the Ally Skills Workshop, which is focused on simple everyday ways for allies to support people who are targets of systemic oppression in their workplaces and communities, including women of all races, people of color of all genders, people with disabilities, LGBTQ folks, and others. This guide and the Ally Skills Workshop are designed and created by [Frame Shift Consulting](#), the [Ada Initiative](#) and the contributors of the [Geek Feminism Wiki](#), and are licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Sharealike 3.0 license](#).

About the Ally Skills Workshop

Often, when we witness oppression, we are so busy being shocked and amazed that we can't quickly react. Other times we have plenty of time to react but can't figure out what to do, or we do something but it turns out to be more harmful than helpful. This is true even for people who have a lot of experience and education in supporting members of marginalized groups in their communities.

The solution is education and practice. By discussing real world scenarios and coming up with answers in a friendly environment, we have a better chance at responding in the real world. In the Ally Skills workshop, a facilitator leads participants in discussions about real world scenarios ranging from creating a friendly environment to confronting overt harassment.

Scope and audience

The Ally Skills workshop is focused on teaching people with privilege how to support members of marginalized groups in their daily lives by taking small, simple, everyday actions - and then learning to make systemic changes to prevent oppression in the first place. It is

designed for people who are voluntarily attending the workshop, and who already agree that oppression exists, that it should stop, and that they personally would like to help end it. An "ally" in this context is someone who wants to help a marginalized group, but is not a member of that group themselves. We prefer the term "ally skills" instead of "allies" because it emphasizes that actions are what make a difference, not self-identification as a supporter by itself.

Members of marginalized groups often also attend the workshop, both to learn techniques and to contribute their knowledge to the discussion. The most successful workshops are 20-40% members of marginalized groups because of the first-person perspective and experience they can bring to the discussions. The scope of the workshop does not include teaching members of marginalized groups how to respond to oppression targeting themselves.

Preparing for the workshop

The workshop only works if the right preparation has been done in advance. Everything included in this section is important for the success of the workshop, so please don't skip any of it!

Preparing to teach the workshop

Teaching the workshop requires some specific speaking skills as well as specific knowledge about the history and present practice of oppression. Here are some steps you can take to prepare.

Practice reframing questions: Participants will ask genuine questions of the form, "I believe this is the right thing to do, but can you help me understand why this apparent logical contradiction isn't true?" For example, when you ask for people to both treat women better AND to not single them out for special treatment, people might say, "It's a contradiction to ask me to treat women better but also just like everyone else."

The first step to take is to affirm the validity of the question: "I used to think that too," or "Excellent question." This acknowledges their good intentions, and helps everyone feel like they are on the same side and makes others more willing to ask questions later.

Next, you need to reframe the question within a larger context. Usually the apparent contradiction is due to leaving out wider societal context of systemic oppression - in this case, the context of widespread sexism in society. In this case, the hidden assumption is that treating people "normally" means treating them like men who don't mind a toxic, sexist environment - the people who haven't left this culture. Therefore, treating women better is treating them differently because their baseline of "normal" behavior is toxic and sexist. Look for hidden assumptions that society already treats two groups of people equally, or that two groups had equal starting places.

In this case, the complete answer with reframing would be: "I used to think that too, because I thought that the way we were treating people was normal. But then I realized that our culture was actually only friendly to men who didn't mind being part of abusive culture. When I changed my definition of normal behavior to be welcoming and inclusive of women too, then I realized that we could treat everyone with equal respect and also be more welcoming of women."

To practice reframing, read Twitter replies, or political arguments on Facebook, and look for the underlying assumptions. Restate people's arguments but with more context.

Cultivate compassion: An important part of leading a workshop is making people feel comfortable and understood when they ask questions or share their opinions (as long as they are acting in good faith and trying hard to be considerate). Often we have to close ourselves off from feeling compassion for others, but in the working being compassionate and understanding of others is crucial to success. <http://selfcompassion.org/> has many useful resources for developing self-compassion which makes compassion for others easier. <http://www.mindful.org/a-loving-kindness-meditation-to-boost-compassion/> is another useful exercise for building compassion for self and others.

Be generous with praise for participants: People are nervous about acting as allies and are more likely to do so if they have a positive experience in the workshop. Practice saying, "Those are good points," "Thank you for bringing that up," "I appreciate you mentioning that," "That was a good discussion," and similar phrases. When people say things that are good, say that they are good. When people say things that don't make sense or aren't helpful, strive to find something positive to say before you point out the downsides of what they just said.

Be ready to share your own mistakes: Showing participants that even the "expert" can make mistakes helps them feel more confident about taking risks themselves. Come ready with at least one story of you making a mistake as an ally, and share it at some point during the workshop.

Practicing apologizing, correcting yourself, and moving on: Teach by example by making a mistake, correcting yourself, and moving on. You should be doing this in your daily life - admitting you are wrong and swiftly moving on - but make a specific commitment to being conscientious about this. If you aren't in a lot of situations where you are making mistakes, push yourself a little out of your comfort zone and go somewhere that you feel safe but not confident that you know the culture or the rules.

Educate yourself: You may already have encyclopedic knowledge about all areas of oppression you are willing to discuss in the workshop. If not, or if you'd like to prepare, here are some suggestions for reading material:

- Geek Feminism Wiki: <http://geekfeminism.wikia.com>
- Everything on the [Ally Skills Workshop handout](#)
- "Feminism is for Everybody" by bell hooks

- “Women, Class, and Race” by Angela Davis

Collect sign-ups in advance

In many cases, you will want to register people in advance for the workshop for several reasons: to get the right number of people for a successful workshop, so that you can screen unhelpful people out in advance, and so you can get the balance of members of privileged groups and members of marginalized groups. You should ask for the following information:

- Preferred name
- Email address
- URL where we can learn more about you (optional)
- Briefly, what are your thoughts on fighting oppression in [FIELD]? (or other screening question)
- How would you describe your [gender/race/sexuality/what area you are most interested in having a diversity of people attending the workshop]? (optional, free-form text field)

The new Google Forms seems to be bug-free and effective for creating this kind of form. Be sure to turn on the feature to send verifications of people's applications. EventBrite makes it hard to review the answers to the questions but is useful when you are charging on a per-applicant basis.

Workshop size

The ideal workshop size is between 20 and 30 people, but the workshop can be run with lower quality with up to 50 people and as few as 5 people. With fewer than 20 people, not as many different ideas get explored during the discussion period in which participants split into groups of 4 to 6 people. With more people, the time to report out from each group becomes longer and limits the number of scenarios that can be discussed. If you have more than 30 people in a workshop, you will need to ask only a subset of the groups to report-out for each scenario (we recommend 5 to 6 at most). Choose the first group in order, then ask for volunteer groups who have something to add.

Participation must be voluntary and in good faith

The workshop is only as good as the people who attend it. The workshop only works when people attend it voluntarily, without external coercion such as an organizational mandate for everyone to take the workshop. They must also be attending in good faith: they already agree that oppression exists, that it should stop, and that they personally would like to help end it. The workshop is not helped by the presence of people skeptical of the basic goals or people “playing devil's advocate.” **If an attendee acts this way, it is your responsibility, as workshop leader, to ask that person to leave.** If you don't do this, you are reproducing oppression inside your workshop, giving marginalized people another experience of oppression, and ruining an opportunity for others to learn. One way to do this is to call an unscheduled break and ask them to leave privately during the break.

Avoid large power differences between attendees

Creating an environment where people feel safe making mistakes and asking honest questions often means avoiding large power differences between attendees. For example, an individual contributor is probably not going to speak up as much if they are in the same group as the CEO of the company. A good rule of thumb is that individual contributors, line managers, and managers of line managers can attend, but no one above that level.

Enforce the rules on attendees

To make sure these rules (voluntary, in good faith, no managers above a certain level) are followed, have discussions with anyone in a position to mandate attendance at the workshop about these rules. Write your advertising material to include these rules and to appeal to people who already believe that oppression is a problem, etc. Example: "Do you think diversity in [FIELD] is important? Would you like to be part of changing the culture of [FIELD] to be more welcoming to members of marginalized groups? You can help by attending the Ally Skills Workshop."

Diversity of participants

The ideal workshop is 20-40% members of marginalized groups, so that each discussion group has at least one and ideally two people from those groups. This is so that each discussion group gets the benefit of their experience and perspective. Having two people in the same group allows them to support each other and makes it more likely the rest of the group will listen to them.

Getting this distribution requires different techniques in different organizations. In some organizations, members of marginalized groups will sign up for the workshop at the same rate as privileged people, even if it is advertised only to the privileged people. In these organizations, recruiting for the workshop should focus on encouraging privileged people to attend in order to get about 20-40% members of marginalized groups. In other organizations, members of marginalized groups will need to be encouraged to sign up directly. We suggest using a registration system that asks people to describe their group membership in a free-form text field (do NOT use a drop-down menu), checking the diversity of the registered attendees regularly, and changing your advertising strategy based on the proportions registered.

Schedule and length

The ideal workshop time is 3 - 3.5 hours, with two 10 minute breaks at about the hour marks. We recommend serving drinks and snacks during the breaks. Allowing a half hour of post-workshop discussion time is often appreciated by participants. It is possible to make the workshop shorter, but the universal feedback from workshop participants was that 2 hours was not long enough. Only a few people have complained that the 3 hour workshop was not long enough.

Choose scenarios and customize slides

Edit the [workshop slides](#) in advance to customize it for you and your audience. If you feel confident changing scenarios on the fly, ask the workshop participants what scenarios and situations they would like to discuss, and reorder the slides to place them first in the scenario section.

Supplies

Things to bring to the workshop:

- Clicker and video input/output converter
- Stopwatch or timer to time the scenario discussions
- Bell or other noisemaker to signal the end of scenario discussions
- A water bottle
- Printouts of the [Ally Skills Workshop handout](#) for all participants
- Pens (for notes) and felt-tip markers (for name tags)
- Name tags, [with "Pronouns:" printed on them](#) if possible

Physical setup

The seating arrangement for the workshop is ideally round tables that seat 4-6 people with the appropriate number of chairs, arranged so that everyone can hear the presenter speaking and see the slides. If you can't get tables, arranging chairs in circles will do. In most rooms and for most people, you will not need any microphone or sound system, but it's good to have microphones available in case the sound turns out to be too poor. You will definitely need a projector. Rearrange anything that interferes with the workshop. Arrive 30 minutes before the workshop to have time to rearrange the room - it is never set up correctly.

Do not record or broadcast the workshop

We do not recommend recording a workshop or broadcasting it online in any way. Recording will make people afraid to answer or discuss, and participants' comments may be taken out of context. If you do decide to record the workshop, some workarounds are to not record the participants, edit out the participants' answers, only record the instructor and have the instructor repeat any participants input in order to anonymize it, or allow each participant to review and request edits of the video before it is released.

Getting feedback

After the workshop, you may want to survey the participants (see this [example survey](#)) to understand the impact of the workshop as well as to gather any feedback from participants about the workshop style and content that they may be uncomfortable sharing in public.

Teaching the introduction

Before the workshop starts

Distribute the workshop handouts and pens at the tables. As people enter the room, ask them to fill out a name tag and include their pronouns, then choose a table. For public workshops, you will want someone to screen people as they enter and make sure they signed up in advance. If

you feel up to it, you can screen people who didn't sign up in advance by asking them what brought them to the workshop and listening to their answers.

Fill time while people are arriving late

Usually people are a few minutes late to the workshop. One way to kill time and get useful information is to ask for volunteers to share why they came to the workshop. This is also good to do simply to get more information to tailor the workshop to the attendees' interests and to get people involved interactively from the start, but it will shorten the time for scenarios.

Introduce yourself

Start by briefly introducing yourself and the name of the workshop, from your title slide. Be sure that your presentation includes attribution or credit to Frame Shift Consulting and the Ada Initiative according to the terms of the CC BY-SA license (a footer or note on the title and closing slide will do nicely).

Explain the format and schedule

Explain the format and schedule of the workshop: how long it will be, when breaks will be, whether each section will be lecture or discussion. When announcing breaks, always tell people that the break will be 5 minutes shorter than you intend. So if the schedule says breaks are 10 minutes long, in reality they are 15 minutes long. Generally, each scenario takes about 15 minutes to discuss, so a 3 hour workshop works out to about 8-9 scenarios.

Here is an example format for a 3 hour workshop:

- 30 minute introduction
- 30 minutes discussion of scenarios
- 10 minute break
- 45 minutes discussion of scenarios
- 10 minute break (really 15 minutes)
- 45 minutes discussion of scenarios
- 10 minute wrap-up

Give more information about yourself

Now is the time to give more information about yourself, specifically what your sources of expertise are. If you have a particular form of privilege that helps people listen to you in the workshop (a specialized skill, a degree from a respected school, you are male, etc.), this is a good time to mention that privilege, acknowledge that it is unfair, and talk about how you are personally using that privilege to end inequity by teaching this workshop.

Define privilege

This part of the workshop is intended to reduce self-doubt and increase the likelihood of privileged people taking action after the workshop.

Begin by defining what privilege, oppression, allies, and targets are. Emphasize that a person can be an ally in one situation and a target in another, depending on the context. Emphasize

that being an ally is about actions, and is not an identity the way that being a target is. Give a concrete example of a privilege, oppression, ally, and target that is not obvious to the majority of the people in the room.

Next, list some of the forms of privilege. Reduce the threat to the audience by talking about the privileges you have and sharing your own experience with discovering your unrealized privileges. Read the quote from the slide about the study showing that people who are from the ethnic majority and men are have fewer penalties for diversity-valuing behavior than ethnic minority folks and women.

Now explain the advantages that a privileged person has in fighting oppression. Privileged people have more time and energy to fight inequality than people who are battling oppression. Privileged people may be in the majority of most groups, so in terms of sheer numbers it makes sense for them to take an active role. If you have statistics or a picture of a typical gathering in your community, this is a good place to put that information. People advocating for groups they aren't part of are seen as altruistic because they are advocating for others. Emphasize that allies should use their privilege to reduce inequality, not perpetuate it.

Define the scope of the workshop

Explain that the workshop isn't about getting a "certification," atoning for past mistakes, or protecting yourself from the consequences of future mistakes, but that you will learn how to respond better when you do make mistakes.

Depending on your position, the topics of legal advice and HR rules may be off-topic for the workshop. If you are teaching the workshop at a company, you may be interpreted as representing human resources (HR_ even when you are not. If people ask questions about HR policy, or about when to report things to HR, we recommend not answering the question if you aren't authorized to do so by HR. This is particularly difficult when a discussion group comes with a solution involving reporting the situation to HR, when in many cases that will result in retaliation for the target of the harassment, up to and including losing their job. However, you can't say outright "don't report to HR" when that is in violation of the company's HR rules. This disclaimer helps avoid in-class confrontations.

Similarly, whether or not you are a lawyer, it is unlikely that you want to offer legal advice in this workshop. The situations described in the scenarios are designed to be not obviously illegal in and of themselves in the United States (though they could be illegal if they were part of a pervasive and severe pattern of harassment).

The workshop is intended only for people who already believe oppression exists and want to act personally to help stop it. Answering questions or discussing whether oppression exists will take too much class time. Provide starting places for people who do have these questions to learn more, like the Geek Feminism Wiki. If someone does start bringing up these questions during the class, remind them of the scope. If they continue after one or two reminders, call a break

and ask them to leave the class. **It is your responsibility and no one else's to ask this person to leave.** If you don't, you are wasting 3 hours of at least 3-5 other people's time, as well as part of the time of everyone in the workshop.

Describe the format of the rest of the workshop

Explain that the rest of the workshop will be in the form of:

- Some terminology
- Discussion guidelines
- Basic ally skills
- Participants form discussion groups of 4-6 people
- Facilitator presents an example scenario
- Participants discuss in small groups for 3-5 minutes
- Each group reports out major conclusions and questions
- Repeat until time is up (with breaks)

Explain terminology and discussion guidelines around gender, race, etc.

People are often very nervous about using the wrong terms for gender, race, etc. Begin by giving them instructions on what to do if they make a mistake: apologize, correct themselves, and move on. Remind them that the terminology and guidelines are on their handout. Between these two things, people usually feel comfortable sitting through a long list of do's and don't's. If you make a mistake, it is really important to apologize, correct yourself, and move on - you might even do it on purpose.

See the [workshop slides](#) for the specific terminology and guidelines to go over. Note that the recommendations in these slides are not universally accepted and are likely to change quickly; usually they are updated at least once a month. Check back on the web site for the latest version.

Each of the current set of terminology slides is included because multiple attendees requested it. You may be tempted to delete slides which seem obvious to you. We recommend running at least one workshop with all the terminology slides and asking for feedback in an anonymous survey as well as paying attention to how many questions people ask in the workshop. Often you will find that what seems obvious to you or should be well-known to people in this area is actually a source of confusion and uncertainty. Many times people do know the right terms to use but don't feel confident that they are right.

Some detail for workshop teachers (but you do not have to go into this level of detail for the attendees): [Gender binary](#) language divides people into "men" and "women" and traits or qualities into "masculine" and "feminine," with no other options. Many people do not identify as either wholly "male" or wholly "female." This means, for example, that using phrases like "men and women" to mean "all adult people regardless of gender" is inaccurate and incorrect (try "people of all genders" instead). Also be aware that "men" is not equivalent to "not

women" or vice versa. Gender is extremely complicated and cannot be reduced to simple biological markers.

The terms for ethnic group and race will vary a lot by region and specific terms will be more relevant to different groups. This is the set of slides you will almost certainly need to edit when you localize the workshop to a new area.

Explain rules for a safer space

Workshops should be safe spaces where participants are allowed to make mistakes and possibly do or say foolish or outright oppressive things (by accident only, and they should respond quickly when asked to stop). Accomplishing that takes a lot of preparation and structure, most of which you've already done. This set of instructions just puts the finishing touches on that preparation.

Assure everyone that they can leave and return at any time, no questions asked. Tell everyone that the workshop is intended to be a safer space for learning and is not being recorded (check that any cameras in the room are actually off - often conferences automatically record all sessions, and many conference rooms have video cameras installed). Ask people not to make fun of people's well-intentioned comments or repeat unflattering stories outside the workshop. Assure people that everyone is here voluntarily because they care about fighting oppression, and that the organizers have done some level of screening. For public workshops, suggest that they only share things that they would share at dinner with people they had met that day at a conference.

Break the tension

Often there's a lot of tension that can result in giggling at inappropriate times because people are nervous about talking about gender, race, and other sensitive matters. We suggest acknowledging the awkwardness explicitly and showing a funny slide or making a joke and giving people a chance to giggle before they get into serious discussion. Be extremely careful about your choice of tension-breaking humor and review it thoroughly if you change it from the default. The choice of sneezing cats in the example slides is deliberate: few people are disturbed or alienated by pictures of cats. (Also, these particular pictures are Creative Commons licensed.)

Review basic principles of responding to oppression

This section covers helpful ground rules for responding to oppression.

- Be short, simple, and firm. Often people fall into the trap of believing their responses must be complex, well-reasoned, and beautifully composed to be effective, and end up doing nothing at all because it is too much work to put together a response. Once you take that pressure off, many people are willing to say things as simple as "We don't do that here" - which is far better than saying nothing at all.
- Humor usually backfires; avoid it. It is possible to respond to oppression with a joke that isn't itself sexist, homophobic, racist, classist, etc., but it's really hard. Most of the

time, participants should leave humor for the experts. The exception is when they have time to review their humor or get other people to review it for them, such as on a mailing list.

- Pick your battles. Oppression is pervasive enough that no one can respond to every incident they see or they'd never get anything else done. Telling participants that they can choose when to respond to oppression (e.g., not on days when they have a migraine or an important presentation) allows them to act when they are able without feeling like a hypocrite for the times they don't act.
- Play for the audience. The person doing the oppression is the person least likely to change their mind, so encourage participants to concentrate on changing the minds of the people listening, if any. The exception to this rule is when the person doing the wrong thing is doing so without full awareness of the effect, and/or the person responding has a positive personal relationship with the person doing the thing.
- Practice your responses. Tell them that comedians practice their lines and they are allowed to as well. It's also okay to choke the first few times they run into a situation; just keep practicing. A useful technique is to pick a few short responses that feel good to them and practice saying them until they come automatically. Some options:
 - "We don't do that around here."
 - "Not cool, dude."
 - "AWWWWWWWKWARD."
- Don't fight one ism with other ism's. Don't say something sexist, homophobic, transphobic, racist, classist, etc. - for example, responding to a situation involving cis female booth babes by asking how people would feel about male homosexual booth babes. In this example, people are invoking homophobia to attempt to evoke empathy with women feeling sexually objectified, which helps no one. Less obvious is that you should avoid making fun of people by claiming they are less sexually attractive or desirable. It may feel good to make fun of someone by saying he won't get a date because he's sexist, but it will not feel good to someone listening who can't get a date for some reason other than their voluntarily chosen horrible opinions.

Forming groups

Now you want the participants to form small groups of 4-6 people, with as much diversity within each group as possible. Forming a group in a training class is almost universally dreaded, so be understanding if this takes some time and you need to help people choose groups. Encourage people by reminding them that everyone is there because they want to fight oppression, so they are probably pretty nice people. If you have set up the room in small tables with seating for 4-6 people at each, you are probably most of the way there. Ask groups of 3 or smaller to join another group. Remind them that they will be encouraged to change groups at the breaks.

Once the groups are formed, ask each group to introduce themselves to each other with ONE SENTENCE which is just their name, their affiliation or job, and their pronouns - emphasize this because otherwise people tend to go on for several minutes about

themselves, and you only want to spend 3 minutes on this section. Demonstrate by introducing yourself in the same way, and then list the other common pronouns you don't use (she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs). Make sure people actually say their pronouns - usually they either forget to say them at all, or they say "the usual pronouns," forcing other people to guess at them.

Ask them to choose a gatekeeper. Then ask them to notify the instructor if the people in their group all have the same pronouns. If this happens, ask for volunteers from groups with more than one or two people of that gender to switch with people from the same gender group. DO NOT guess at a person's gender and ask them to switch. If there aren't enough people of each gender to do this, it is okay - you are just trying avoid a situation where, e.g., 4 women sit in the same group and 3 groups have no women at all. It's difficult to adapt this technique for other dimensions of diversity - asking people to identify as specific races, sexualities, or religion is more difficult than asking them to identify as specific genders, which is usually something people have to do every day because English and many other languages are gendered.

After a few minutes, starting walking around the groups asking if the gatekeeper has been chosen. Next, stop their discussion and tell them to avoid rules-lawyering; specifically ask them to not spend too much time focusing on whether a scenario was actually an instance of oppression or not. It's okay to spend some time talking about how to tell when something is oppressive but the focus of discussion should not be on how in some incredibly unlikely situation the scenario isn't oppressive. There are no trick questions in the workshop. The focus of the discussion should be on what privileged people can do in that situation to help (and specifically not what the targeted person can do).

Tips for scenario discussion

Now you are ready to discuss scenarios: examples of situations in which privileged people take action to support people who are targets of oppression. Plan for about 12 - 15 minutes total time for each scenario.

The scenarios should start with easier, lower-stakes situations and progress to more difficult situations to let the participants get comfortable with each other and the format. Feel free to create your own scenarios or discuss ones suggested by the participants. It is important that they are based on real-world examples - discussing hypotheticals is often a waste of time. All of the example scenarios we provide are directly based on events that have actually happened. None are exaggerated or unusually rare.

For each scenario, read the scenario aloud and tell the groups they have 3 minutes (somewhere between 3 and 5 minutes is recommended) to talk amongst themselves about the scenario, propose various responses, and come up with questions to ask. Try to listen unobtrusively to the discussion in the groups. Try not to interrupt people when they are in the midst of an important conversation, but you will have to stop the discussion while people are

still talking excitedly in almost every case. Give people 30 seconds warning before the discussion ends by saying, "30 seconds!" loudly. A bell is useful to signal the end of the discussion without shouting yourself hoarse. It will get harder to stop discussion as the workshop goes on.

Once everyone has quieted down, ask each group to do their report-out, listing their major discussion points, suggestions, insights, and questions. Start with a different group each time so that every group gets a chance to list the most common insights first. At the end of each report-out, briefly recap any points you'd like to emphasize, point out any problems in their suggestions (like places where they are being unintentionally harmful to another marginalized group), and answer any questions they have. However, try to resist making any points that weren't directly suggested or requested until all the groups have reported out, so participants get the reward of coming up with answers on their own.

In between scenarios is a good time to present tips relevant to the previous scenario, draw people's attention to how they are conducting discussion, etc. Alternating between group discussion, group report-out, and very short lectures or stories is a good way to keep people engaged. Don't forget to take breaks; usually participants don't notice the time flying by and may not remind you to take a break if you forget.

Scenarios, tips, and discussion guide

This section is arranged so that the scenarios and tips from the example slides come first, in the order they are in the slides, followed by scenarios not included in the example presentation.

Scenario: A woman is standing near your group at an event

A woman you don't know is standing near your group at a conference or similar event in a male-dominated field. She is wearing a head scarf that looks like a Muslim hijab to you. She is alone and looks like she would rather be talking to people.

Ideal response:

- Walk up and stand a little farther away from what you think is the usual distance, raise your hand in a friendly manner, and say, "Hello, my name is \$NAME. How are you enjoying the event?" If she offers to shake hands, shake hands then. Don't ask her name if she doesn't offer it. If she responds in a positive way, make a little bit of small talk but quickly move on to ask her, "My friends and I were discussing \$TOPIC over there, would you care to join us?"

Bad responses:

- "What do you do?" or "Where do you work?" Women are often challenged on their credentials at conferences or events, and this can be mistaken for questioning her right to be there or trying to suss out her relative status.
- Asking for her name, location, marital or family status.
- Telling her personal information like your own marital status, location, etc.

- Continuing a two-person conversation for more than a few minutes before offering to introduce her to the group.
- Making an explicit request to touch her, by offering to shake hands or kiss on the cheek.

Points to cover:

- You **MUST** talk about the underlying tension in this scenario: we assume men are heterosexual and likely to be making a sexual advance if they speak to a strange woman. It is great if someone mentions that they don't want to appear to be hitting on the woman, in that case, thank them and explain the problem. If no one mentions it in their report-out, ask a question about what makes people nervous about approaching a woman in this scenario. Explain that the ways to counter this are to stand a little farther away than usual, don't ask her name, ask a very neutral impersonal question, and quickly invite her to join a larger group rather than continue talking one-on-one.
- People will suggest asking a woman to do this. It's okay to ask a woman to do this, but it is important that men are willing to take on this responsibility when there isn't a woman to do it. If they are physically intimidating for some reason (great height, unusual personal style, etc.), it is reasonable someone else to do this.
- Don't tell her about your partner or children or sexual orientation. This is often seen by well-meaning allies as a signal that they aren't hitting on a woman; unfortunately plenty of people cheat on their partners and begin sexual advances by oversharing personal information about their partners and children.
- Many women who wear hijab prefer not to touch men outside their families for religious reasons. This is a good segue to acknowledge that many other people prefer not to touch strangers for a variety of reasons: health, personal preference, etc. Make it easy to convert the waving hand into shaking hands or cheek kissing or whatever the local cultural greeting involving touching is, but don't insist on it or make it awkward for her to refuse it.

Tip: Pay attention to patterns of discussion related to gender, race, age, etc.

The next slide asks people to be aware of whether people are having difficulty being heard or dominating the conversation, and whether there are patterns related to gender, race, age, or other factors. It is important to raise this awareness early for two reasons: First, some people may already be frustrated by being interrupted or talked over in the first 3 minutes of a workshop designed to stop oppression. Second, you want to stop this behavior very early in the workshop or else participants won't get the full benefit.

Scenario: Person with disability is ignored in a meeting

At a meeting, a disabled person makes a suggestion but no one picks up on it. Later, someone without disabilities makes the same suggestion and is given credit for it.

Presentation tip: Ask for a show of hands of everyone who has seen this happen.

Ideal responses:

- "I'm glad you picked up on [person's name]'s idea! [Person's name], could you expand on that?"
- Systemic response: Start an organization-wide initiative to encourage formally using [meeting roles](#) like gatekeepers and note-takers. Gatekeepers make sure people get to speak who might otherwise not, and note-takers document who said what first.
- For anything more confrontational, first ask for the target's consent. Then agree on whether you might say something more confrontational, speak to the person's manager after the meeting, or something else.

Bad:

- Start a confrontation without the target's consent.

Points to cover:

- It is crucial to explicitly call out the concept of consent of the target when attempting to help in ways that could result in retaliation on the target. The ideal responses are unlikely to generate blowback, but anything else needs consent. Consent is tricky; there is a point where someone's behavior becomes a public problem and it is no longer up to the target to decide whether other people can take action. But in general it is best to err on the side of consent and avoiding increasing harm to the target.
- The first step is noticing when this happens. Encourage people to try paying more attention to who speaks and gets credit in meetings (this will require speaking less for some people for a while).
- Note that if you are the subject this is happening to, you have few options. This is why an ally needs to do this.
- Note that this can happen to any person known to be a member of an underrepresented marginalized group

Tip: Effective and just meetings

Good meetings have the following roles:

- Facilitator
- Timekeeper
- Notetaker
- Gatekeeper

Read more about what each role involves at: <https://frameshiftconsulting.com/meeting-skills/>

Scenario: Mailing list post uses a woman as an example of an ignorant person

On a company mailing list, someone writes "How would you explain this [technical thing] to your grandmother?"

Ideal responses:

- Publicly reply with "Did you mean, how would I explain this to a technically unsavvy person? Then I would [answer their question]." (This avoids a flame war.)

- If the list has a code of conduct and way to report violations, do that.
- Systemic response: Publicly reply with "I am tired of people using women as examples of technically unsavvy people. Plenty of women are experts in this area [name some if you want]. I want a code of conduct for this list."
- If you have a close relationship with the person and you know they are interested in promoting diversity, try replying privately first with something like: "Hey, I know you had no intention of doing this, but when you used grandmother as an example, you were reinforcing the idea that women and older people aren't interested or welcome in this area." In the ideal case, they will reply to themselves publicly to correct their first email. If they don't, it is still up to you to reply publicly so the people listening know what is acceptable behavior.

Bad:

- Suggesting replacement with a person of a particular profession (classism) or some other group stereotyped as less technical.
- Very young people are a technically a valid example, but it's best to get out of the habit of invoking lazy stereotypes altogether and go with saying what you mean - "technically unsavvy person."
- Just replying with examples of women or older people who are experts in this area. That is a popular response but needs to be combined with the above techniques.

Points to cover:

- This example includes both sexism and ageism.
- There must be some public response from someone - everyone on the list has seen this email, so everyone needs to see a response or they will think that behavior is normal.
- When people use "girlfriend" as the example, that has some other assumptions built-in: that the reader is male, heterosexual, and relatively young.

Preparation tips:

- Read the [Geek Feminism page](#) on the topic "So simple a mother could do it."

Tip: Charles Rules of Argument

Often people have had such miserable experiences with flame wars - long back-and-forth discussions on mailing lists that escalate into name-calling or other unpleasant behavior - that they will refuse to consider replying publicly in these situations. [Charles' Rules of Argument \(Geek Feminism edition\)](#) are a great way to help people feel like they can reply without giving up the next three days of their life. Short version:

- Don't go looking for an argument
- State your position once, speaking to the audience
- Wait for absurd replies
- Reply one more time to correct any misunderstandings of your first statement

- Do not reply again
- Spend time doing something fun instead

Scenario: Someone criticizes a Black person's behavior using racist terms

A Black person in your community points out on social media that a conference in your community has all white speakers. Several other people criticize them for being too abrasive, aggressive, loud, out of line, etc.

Ideal response:

- Reply publicly with "This is an example of the tone argument: http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Tone_argument"
- Reply publicly with "Funny, when [WHITE MAN] does that, we all act like that's normal."
- Reply publicly with "I believe this is a serious problem and does not reflect my values. I support [BLACK PERSON]."
- Systemic response: Start counting people by gender, race, or other qualities whenever you see a group: in a meeting, on a board of directors, on a speakers page, etc. Raise concerns when a group you are part of is overrepresented.

Bad:

- Give advice to the person they are complaining about on how to present their argument better, seem less aggressive, etc.
- Argue that the person isn't actually aggressive, loud, etc. while implicitly accepting that these things are negative for Black people but are okay for white people.
- Send them a private message of support while not making a public statement of support - this is often asking the person to do emotional labor on your behalf by replying and saying, "It's okay, I know you aren't like that" or something similar.

Points to cover:

- Point out that this is a very specific stereotype: the "Angry Black Man" or "Angry Black Woman."
- Point out that this problem of being perceived as "too" aggressive, etc. applies to many other marginalized groups, especially women and disabled people.
- Discuss how the same behaviors may get different labels for privileged people and targets, and some labels themselves are positive for privileged people but negative for targets ("aggressive," "ambitious," "dominant").

Tip: The tone argument

People use criticism of the way people say something (the "tone") as a way to ignore what people are saying. Often people interpret someone saying something that hurts their feelings as a problem with the way they are saying it (e.g., claiming they are "yelling" or "angry" when what they mean is that they felt guilt and shame when they listened to the words). Some subjects are inherently unpleasant for people in power to hear (such as "you have personally

benefited from generations of colonial occupation and enslavement") and thus the tone argument will always apply. Learn more at:

http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Tone_argument

Scenario: Performance reviews are biased against women

You are part of the performance review process at your company. The feedback for several women include comments like "Needs to work on her communication style," or "too aggressive." Others are vague and non-specific. Fewer men's reviews have the same problems.

Presentation tip: Immediately go to the next slide with a quote from the research before starting the discussion to show that it is a widespread problem of bias against women. Otherwise participants will spend most of their time talking about whether the woman actually was abrasive or if this was sexist.

Ideal responses:

- Go to management with a request to change the review process to be more objective and fair, and to discourage personality critiques. Ways to make reviews more objective include: simple 1-5 rating questions, limited opportunities for free-form text, systems that highlight language that suggests unconscious bias, explicit reminders of what unconscious bias is and what it looks like before filling out a review or making promotion decisions.
- Start a discussion about the culture of leadership at this organization. If the leadership culture is itself abrasive and otherwise incompatible with our stereotypes of a "good woman" but compatible with stereotypes about male leadership, this kind of imbalance in performance reviews is often a sign.
- Ask for unconscious bias training that results in people lowering their bias (some kinds of unconscious bias training make people feel like it is okay to have that bias and actually increase biased actions afterwards). Recommend training from [Paradigm IQ](#).
- Request that your company start using [Greenhouse](#), [Textio](#), and other software systems designed to highlight and reduce bias in interview feedback, performance reviews, job descriptions, and similar areas.

Bad:

- Ask the person who wrote the review to go into more detail about exactly what the women did. Presumably the idea is to show that the woman wasn't actually abrasive. But the problem is that everyone is abrasive, just men get away with it.
- Talk to the women about how to appear less abrasive or get them training.

Points to cover:

- Point out that this also applies to Black people, people of color in general, people with disabilities, and other groups.

- At some point, ask the participants if they think the women in the company are actually more abrasive and aggressive than the men. This helps refocus on the problem: women can't behave in ways that men can, and often these forbidden behaviors are key to being a leader in their organization.
- If people ask what their position is in this scenario, tell them to talk about what they could do in their current position in this kind of situation: individual contributor, line manager, head of HR, whatever. The workshop is about figuring out what our position of power is and what we can do in that position, not fantasizing about what we would do if we had more power.
- A different but related problem is failure to give women feedback that is specific enough to help them take their work to the next level. The feedback that helps people get promoted is specific and focused on showing that person's impact on business objectives.

Scenario: New mother gets less prestigious assignments

A woman in your company goes on maternity leave. You are discussing which projects to assign to people after she has returned, including one that is in her area of expertise and requires some travel. A co-worker says, "She has a small baby, she won't want to travel."

Ideal responses:

- Ask if the woman in question has said that she doesn't want to travel when she returns. If the answer is no, request that someone contact her to find out what her travel preferences are before assuming she won't want to travel.
- Systemic response: Have an explicit system in place for asking all employees about their travel preferences. Look into ways to support employees who need to travel regardless of gender or parental status: allowing caregivers to travel with them, paying for at-home support, reducing unnecessary travel.

Bad:

- Let planning go ahead without finding out what her travel preferences are.
- Only asking travel preferences from pregnant women.

Points to cover:

- Sexist discrimination against women often intensifies when they become mothers. The form discrimination often takes is assuming women don't want higher status assignments without actually consulting them.
- All employees can suddenly and unpredictably become unable to work for several months at a time. Acting as though pregnant women are the only people this happens to is discriminatory and puts your business in a precarious position.

Tip: What Works for Women at Work

What Works for Women at Work by Joan C. Williams and Rachel Dempsey is what Lean In should have been - advice for women on how to survive workplace bias that acknowledges that systemic oppression exists and is wrong, and that women can mitigate its effects on them by choosing responses that vary by race, ethnicity, parental status, location, personal style, physical appearance, and other factors. More than half the women they interviewed for this book were women of color. The four patterns are:

1. Prove-it-again: People forget information that goes against their stereotypes, so women must repeatedly prove themselves over and over again. They also don't get promoted on potential, only on what they've already proven themselves able to do.
2. The Tightrope: Women have to walk a narrow line between being too feminine and not feminine enough. Too feminine and they violate stereotypes about good performers; not feminine enough and they violate stereotypes about how women behave.
3. The Maternal Wall: People double down on negative stereotypes about women when they become mothers - it intensifies their femininity and all the stereotypes that go with it.
4. Tug-of-war: Women end up fighting each other for limited resources because the powers that be create situations where women have to compete. For example, if an executive team of about ten people has exactly one woman, it is LESS likely that another woman will be promoted to that same level. Women act like there can be only one woman at a particular level because often that is actually true.

Scenario: Co-worker expresses transphobic opinions to you in private

A co-worker comes out as trans. Another co-worker assumes you are cis and starts complaining to you privately about how ridiculous it is to expect everyone to start using your co-worker's new name and pronouns.

Ideal responses:

- "While it's a challenge to remember the new names and pronouns, I personally think it's totally reasonable to other people's decisions about their name and gender."
- "It's hard and embarrassing for me to do this because I keep making mistakes, but then I think about how much harder it is for [CO-WORKER'S NEW NAME] to completely change their life and put up with all this transphobia. Really, they are doing something much harder and I am glad I can support them in being true to themselves."
- If you don't have the energy that day, "This conversation is making me uncomfortable. How about [CHANGE OF SUBJECT]?"

Bad:

- Changing the subject without saying why.
- Appearing to agree with them out of pure dislike of conflict - it's fine if they have power over you and you think they might harm you if you don't agree.

Points to cover:

- Point out that often people who take this approach believe that the majority of their peers agree with them, but are afraid to say so publicly. This is your chance to change that opinion.
- Point out that as uncomfortable as it is for them to confront this person, it is far more uncomfortable for the person being targeted to work with them or experience this behavior directly.

Tip: Read the Captain Awkward advice blog

During this section, people are likely to ask questions like “How do I get someone to stop doing something bad without upsetting anyone?” (Hint: you can't.) Direct them to the Captain Awkward advice blog: <http://captainawkward.com>. Captain Awkward answers questions on social interaction from an awkward, geeky perspective. You can also reframe this kind of question as, “Someone is already upset: you, and anyone else this behavior is harming.” Often the problem is we value the feelings of the more powerful person than multiple less powerful people.

Scenario: Someone makes a sex joke at a work event, while drinking

At a party at work, a male co-worker makes a joke about how much sex another male co-worker must have had in order to have so many children. Everyone is holding an alcoholic drink.

Presentation tip: Ask for a show of hands from people who have seen something like this happen. Explain what the "joke" is about: that it is considered a compliment to say that a man has a lot of sex.

Ideal responses:

- "Awwwkward."
- "We don't do that around here."
- If the person making the joke is too powerful for you to confront, silently leave the area.
- Bring it up with the joker's manager after the event (or make an anonymous complaint to the board of directors if they are the CEO).
- If you laugh out of nervousness or surprise, collect yourself and say as quickly as possible, "I'm sorry, I wasn't laughing because that was funny, I was laughing because I was uncomfortable."
- Systemic response: Have a discussion at work about the rules still applying when people are drinking.
- Systemic response: Reduce signals that excessive alcohol consumption and associated bad behavior are welcome in your workplace (see Kara Sowles' "[Alcohol and Inclusivity: Planning Tech Events with Non-Alcoholic Options](#)", included on the example handout).

Bad:

- Wait for the woman who “usually” speaks up about these things to say something.

- Make a joke in reply. It is really hard to tell how serious people are in this context, and it is likely to backfire.
- Laugh or smile nervously but don't say anything or leave.

Points to cover:

- The following tip slides cover a lot of less-obvious issues that come up: homophobia, racism, religious discrimination, cis-sexism, strong feelings about fertility, pregnancy, and having babies, but this section will list the things that need to be addressed right away when they come up in discussion.
- Make sure people get that women can't win when co-workers are talking about sex: while for men there's a wide range of "acceptable" amounts of sex, women are either having too much sex or too little, and being judged for it.
- In the discussion, emphasize that workplace rules against sexual harassment and assault still apply when everyone is drinking.
- Point out that [research shows that alcohol does not physically cause people to become sexually inappropriate or violent](#) - that's all culturally mediated.
- Reassure people that it's okay if they giggle nervously or freeze up. It's okay to say, "I'm sorry, that wasn't actually funny, I just laughed because I was so surprised anyone would say that," or to wait and address it after the event if they are too shocked in the moment.

Tip: Why talking about sex at work is harmful

In the previous scenario, people will often ask whether it's okay if everyone involved is male, or if there are any situations in which talking about sex at work is okay. These slides are an opportunity to explain heterosexism's double standard for straight sex vs. gay sex, religious considerations, why reproductive status should be private, the sexual double standard for women, sexual objectification of women, and how talking about sex triggers discrimination against women. Read more about [objectification on the Geek Feminism wiki](#).

Tip: Myths about alcohol

The immediate physiological effects of alcohol are:

- Loss of coordination
- Sleepiness
- Difficulty multi-tasking
- Everything else is culturally mediated

Read more at <http://www.sirc.org/publik/drinking4.html> and <https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/alcohol-and-inclusivity-planning-tech-events-with-non-alcoholic-options>

Wrap-up

The wrap-up introduces some more advanced ally skills which participants can use to continuing learning how to support members of marginalized groups in their communities.

- Don't expect praise and credit for fighting oppression. One aspect of privilege is a feeling of entitlement on the part of privileged people to the attention and gratitude of marginalized people, even for actions which should be considered normal.
- Follow and support leaders from target groups rather than becoming a leader yourself. We are socialized to give privileged people's voices more attention and respect, and if you begin to take action against oppression, you are likely to be turned to more often than equally qualified members of marginalized groups. To fight this, support their leadership and projects and redirect people to them when they approach you for high-prestige projects.
- Assume members of marginalized groups have more knowledge and wait for invitation to help or explain. While many of the concepts and skills in this workshop may be new to allies, they are familiar to targets through sheer necessity. Also, offering help directly to people inappropriately, especially to people you don't have a prior relationship with, can be harassing and harmful in itself.
- Follow your discomfort - if something makes you feel bad, find out more and understand the cause of your feelings before reacting. Discomfort is often a reaction to having your unearned societal advantages pointed out to you, which causes guilt. Learn to identify feelings of discomfort or guilt as an opportunity for learning.
- When you make a mistake, apologize, correct yourself, and move on.

The final slide should include these resources and any others from your organization:

- Slides, video, curriculum at: <http://frameshiftconsulting.com/ally-skills-workshop>
- Geek Feminism Wiki: <http://geekfeminism.wikia.com>

Thank them for attending and making the workshop great, and then ask them to give themselves a round of applause. If possible, stick around to answer questions for at least 15 minutes.

About Frame Shift Consulting

[Frame Shift Consulting](#) helps organizations create an inclusive, effective, and diverse organizational culture. We specialize in technology companies and technical conferences who prefer to be on the leading edge of diversity and inclusion.

We help your organization create long-lasting systemic culture change through discussion-oriented workshops, customized education plans, and speaking engagements. Our goal is to raise organization-wide awareness and build motivation to change from within. Our services include:

- Ally Skills Workshop: Teaching simple everyday ways to support people who are targets of systemic oppression
- Keynotes and speeches: Engaging talks on diversity in the interactive "fireside chat" format with audience Q&A

- Code of conduct design: Advice on the design and implementation of codes of conduct for online and in-person spaces
- Harassment report training: Teaching people to respond to harassment reports effectively
- Inclusive event design: Advice on organizing highly interactive and inclusive events, such as unconferences
- Train-the-trainers: Teaching people to lead our classes, such as the Ally Skills Workshop

All of our work is premised on the open acknowledgement of systemic bias against women, people of color, LGBTQ folks, people with disabilities, sex workers, older people, mothers, young people, non-neurotypical people, undocumented people, and people of lower socioeconomic status.

Our principal consultant Valerie Aurora brings many years of professional experience at the front lines of the diversity in tech movement. She led the creation and adoption of the most popular example conference code of conduct, co-founded the Ada Initiative, led the creation of the Ally Skills Workshop, and co-organized the AdaCamp series of unconferences for women in open technology and culture. Prior to that, she worked as an open source software engineer for over ten years.

To have a conversation about your organization's needs, contact us at contact@frameshiftconsulting.com. If we aren't a good match for you, we will be happy to refer you to organizations we trust.