

Allyship Archetypes

This resource introduces the allyship archetype framework — drawing on the work of Karen Catlin and related research — to help DSD staff identify how they currently practice allyship, what other archetypes are available, and how to build a sustained, role-appropriate allyship practice. It addresses the difference between performative and sustained allyship and connects allyship to DSD's specific context.

Content

What this is for

This resource introduces the allyship archetype framework — drawing on the work of Karen Catlin and related research — to help DSD staff identify how they currently practice allyship, what other archetypes are available, and how to build a sustained, role-appropriate allyship practice. It addresses the difference between performative and sustained allyship and connects allyship to DSD's specific context.

Why this matters in DSD work

Allyship is a behavioral commitment — a practice of using one's own access, influence, and credibility in service of people from marginalized communities. At DSD, allyship is both a workforce equity practice (how majority-group staff support colleagues from marginalized communities) and a service quality practice (how staff support equitable access and experience for the people DSD serves).

The challenge with allyship as a concept is that it is often understood as a status ("I am an ally") rather than as a practice ("I practice allyship"). Status claims without behavioral follow-through are at best insufficient and at worst harmful — they create the impression of support without its substance. The archetype framework is useful precisely because it moves from identity to behavior: what do allies actually do?

Core concepts

The allyship archetype framework

Karen Catlin's work on better allyship identifies seven archetypes of ally action (noting that the nine-archetype formulation referenced in the task spec aggregates related types):

1. The Sponsor

A sponsor uses their access to opportunity and decision-making to create opportunities for people from marginalized communities — advocating for someone's promotion, recommending them for projects, ensuring their name is in the room when decisions are made.

At DSD: A supervisor who advocates for a staff member from an underrepresented community to lead a high-visibility project when that opportunity might otherwise not have gone to them.

2. The Champion

A champion publicly advocates for the value and contributions of marginalized colleagues — crediting their work, naming their contributions in meetings, and speaking positively about them to people with influence.

At DSD: A senior leader who explicitly names and attributes the contributions of staff from marginalized communities rather than allowing those contributions to go unrecognized.

3. The Amplifier

An amplifier ensures that marginalized voices are heard in group settings — repeating and attributing an idea that was overlooked when raised by a marginalized colleague, inviting quieter voices to contribute, and interrupting dominant voices when they are crowding out others.

At DSD: A meeting facilitator who notices that a particular voice has been repeatedly overlooked and specifically invites that person to share their perspective.

4. The Advocate

An advocate works in systemic and structural ways to create more equitable conditions — not only supporting individuals but working to change policies, practices, and processes that produce inequitable outcomes.

At DSD: A program manager who examines a hiring process, identifies bias-producing elements, and advocates for structural changes rather than only trying to support individual candidates from marginalized communities.

5. The Scholar

A scholar takes responsibility for their own education — reading, listening, learning, and staying current on the experiences and perspectives of communities they want to ally with, rather than expecting those community members to educate them.

At DSD: A staff member who regularly reads literature by and about the communities DSD serves, who completes the CQ learning library materials, and who follows equity scholarship in disability and cultural communities.

6. The Confidant

A confidant creates a safe relationship in which colleagues from marginalized communities can express concerns, experiences, and emotions without filtering for the dominant-group audience — a person who listens without defensiveness, keeps confidences, and doesn't need the experience translated into language that's comfortable for them.

At DSD: A trusted peer who colleagues know they can talk to honestly about their experience of DSD's

organizational culture without the conversation being repeated or used against them.

7. The Upstander

An upstander intervenes when they witness harm — using calling in, calling out, or the 5 Ds bystander framework to address discriminatory language, microaggressions, or exclusionary behavior in real time.

At DSD: A staff member who, in a team meeting, gently corrects a colleague who has used outdated or harmful language to refer to a disability community member.

(Note: Catlin's framework names seven archetypes; some formulations aggregate or add archetypes. The core categories above reflect the primary behavioral types.)

Finding the right archetype for the moment

Effective allyship is situationally appropriate — what is needed in a specific moment determines which archetype is most useful:

- In a meeting where a colleague's voice is being overlooked: Amplifier
- In a performance review season: Sponsor or Champion
- After witnessing harmful language: Upstander
- In designing a hiring process: Advocate
- In a learning conversation about a community you serve: Scholar
- When a colleague from a marginalized community needs to vent: Confidant

No single archetype is more valuable than others — the combination is what produces a comprehensive allyship practice. Staff who practice only one archetype miss the others. Staff who cycle through all seven are practicing sustained allyship.

Sustained allyship practice

Allyship is a practice, not an identity. The move from "I am an ally" to "I practice allyship consistently" is the critical shift. Practice implies:

- Regularity: allyship that only happens when it's visible or convenient is not sustained
- Learning: allyship requires ongoing education about the experiences and needs of the communities you ally with — education that comes primarily from listening and reading, not from expecting community members to teach you
- Accountability: sustained allies ask for feedback on their allyship — not from community members as a burden, but from trusted sources who will tell them the truth
- Repair: sustained allies acknowledge when they have caused harm, and repair it — not defensively, not performatively, but genuinely

Centering those most affected. The quality of allyship is evaluated not by the ally's intentions but by its impact on the people the ally is trying to support. What do colleagues and community members from

marginalized communities actually experience when you practice allyship? That experience — not your assessment of your own intentions — is the measure.

Allyship and power

Allyship is most meaningful at the intersection of difference and power. Staff with racial majority privilege can ally with colleagues and community members from racially marginalized communities. Staff without disabilities can ally with disabled colleagues and the people DSD serves. LGBTQ+ -inclusive staff can ally with LGBTQ+ colleagues and community members.

This does not mean that people from one marginalized community cannot ally with people from another — they often can, and those forms of allyship are valuable. It means that allyship is most powerful when the person practicing it has relevant access, privilege, or influence that they are willing to use in service of equity.

Practical application

Identify your current archetype. Look at the seven archetypes. Which one are you most consistently practicing? Which are you not practicing at all? Why?

Choose one underdeveloped archetype to build. Identify one specific archetype you rarely or never practice and identify one concrete, time-bound action you will take in that archetype role in the next month.

Audit your allyship for impact. Ask a trusted colleague from a community you ally with: "What do you experience as supportive from me, and where do I miss?" This feedback is the calibration mechanism for allyship practice.

Practice the Scholar archetype regularly. Identify one resource — a book, an article, a CQ guide, a podcast — by or about a community DSD serves that you will engage with in the next month. Make this a regular practice.

Build the Confidant relationship deliberately. If you have colleagues from marginalized communities who trust you with their honest experiences, protect that trust scrupulously. If you don't, examine why and what might build it.

Common challenges

"I don't want to overstep." Allyship practiced carefully — with attentiveness to what is actually needed, with genuine listening, and with willingness to hear "that wasn't helpful" — is rarely overstepping. The more common failure is understep: doing nothing because of fear of doing the wrong thing.

"I'm from a marginalized community myself; does this apply to me?" Yes. Allyship is available to and important from everyone. Your own marginalization in one dimension does not exempt you from practicing allyship in dimensions where you have more access or privilege.

"I'm afraid of getting it wrong." You will get it wrong sometimes. The response to getting it wrong is what matters: acknowledge, learn, repair, continue. The alternative — disengagement to avoid mistakes — is not allyship.

Connection to DSD's six program goals

Sustained allyship from DSD staff builds the inclusive workplace culture that DSD's program goals require, and demonstrates to the communities DSD serves that the organization's equity commitments are practiced by the people who work there.

Connection to other leadership competencies

- Calling In vs. Calling Out (Asset 27): The Upstander archetype in practice
- DEAI Integration Across Leadership (Asset 24): Allyship is DEAI at the relational level
- Inclusive Supervision Foundations (Asset 9): Supervisors who ally with their staff build more inclusive teams

Reflective questions

1. Which of the seven allyship archetypes do you practice most consistently? Which do you never practice?
2. Think of a colleague from a marginalized community at DSD. What does your allyship look like in practice for that person? What would they say about its impact?
3. When was the last time you practiced the Scholar archetype — reading, listening, or learning about a community you serve or work alongside? What did you learn?
4. What is the form of allyship most needed in your current work context? Who needs it and from whom?
5. What would sustained allyship look like as a regular practice — not a single act, but an ongoing, monthly, weekly commitment?

Sources

- Catlin, K. (2019). Better allies: Everyday actions to create inclusive, engaging workplaces. Better Allies Press. <https://betterallies.com> (<https://betterallies.com>)
- Forbes / Kratz, J. (2024). 7 research-backed allyship archetypes every leader needs to practice. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/juliekratz/2024/01/07/7-research-backed-allyship-archetypes-every-leader-needs-to-practice/> (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/juliekratz/2024/01/07/7-research-backed-allyship-archetypes-every-leader-needs-to-practice/>)
- Brown, B. (2018). Dare to lead: Brave work. Tough conversations. Whole hearts. Random House.
- One DSD L01 Massive DEIA Multimedia Resource Library. One DSD People, Equity and Culture Program.
- One DSD L05 Inclusive Leadership Library. One DSD People, Equity and Culture Program.

Always defer to the person in front of you. Leadership is a practice, not a position.

Identify your current archetype. Look at the seven archetypes. Which one are you most consistently practicing? Which are you not practicing at all? Why?

Choose one underdeveloped archetype to build. Identify one specific archetype you rarely or never practice and identify one concrete, time-bound action you will take in that archetype role in the next month.

Build the Confidant relationship deliberately. If you have colleagues from marginalized communities who trust you with their honest experiences, protect that trust scrupulously. If you don't, examine why and what might build it.

Ask: When was the last time you practiced the Scholar archetype — reading, listening, or learning about a community you serve or work alongside? What did you learn?

Ask: What is the form of allyship most needed in your current work context? Who needs it and from whom?

Ask: What would sustained allyship look like as a regular practice — not a single act, but an ongoing, monthly, weekly commitment?

Choose the relevant guidance, verify fit and currency, and apply it to the work product using Allyship Archetypes.

For division leadership, use Allyship Archetypes to choose the relevant guidance, verify fit and currency, and apply it to the work product; set direction, allocate resources, name accountable owners, and review outcome patterns. Start by identify your current archetype. Look at the seven archetypes. Which one are you most consistently practicing? Which are you not practicing at all? Why?

For community engagement staff, use Allyship Archetypes to choose the relevant guidance, verify fit and currency, and apply it to the work product; plan accessible participation, make influence visible, and close the feedback loop with community partners. Start by choose one underdeveloped archetype to build. Identify one specific archetype you rarely or never practice and identify one concrete, time-bound action you will take in that archetype role in the next month.

For facilitators learning leads, use Allyship Archetypes to choose the relevant guidance, verify fit and currency, and apply it to the work product; build the guidance into preparation, practice, debrief, access checks, and follow-up. Start by build the Confidant relationship deliberately. If you have colleagues from marginalized communities who trust you with their honest experiences, protect that trust scrupulously. If you don't, examine why and what might build it.

Do not replace official legal, policy, clinical, supervisory, program, or Tribal authority.

Do not infer an individual's identity, preferences, needs, or experience from group-level information.

State uncertainty, use current authoritative sources, and escalate when the decision exceeds the user's role.

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