

# CANVAS8



How can organisations show they're committed to allyship?  
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THOUGHT LEADER

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## DR. ANATASIA KIM ON ORGANISATIONAL ALLYSHIP

The events of 2020 have seen organisations across the world denounce systemic racism, but dismantling racial bias is complex and time-consuming work. Canvas8 spoke to Dr. Anatasia Kim to discuss the concept of allyship and how it can be fulfilled at an organisational level.

Location Global

### Highlights & Data

- Many brands' haste to align themselves with the Black Lives Matter movement has seen them fail to acknowledge their own current and historic complicity in perpetuating systemic racism

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- Allyship is an ongoing endeavour that necessitates the deliberate allocation of time, energy, and resources
- Fear and discomfort often prevent people from engaging with difficult conversations regarding racism and White privilege in the workplace
- **54%** of attendants at anti-racism demonstrations in Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and New York City in June 2020 were White (*Brookings, 2020*)
- TV ad spend on racial justice messaging totalled \$1.6 million in the month leading up to 23 June 2020 – 5.75 times the total spend in 2018 and 2019 combined (*Numerator, 2020*)
- The representation of ethnic-minorities on UK and US executive teams stood at only 13% in 2019 (*McKinsey, 2020*)

### Scope

“We have never seen protests like these before,” writes Stanford sociologist Dr. Doug McAdam for *Jacobin*. “In turnout, perseverance, and the ethnic and racial diversity of those participating.” [1] The killing of George Floyd in police custody on 25 May, 2020, triggered a wave of anti-racism demonstrations that are considered to be the largest movement in US history. [2] As Dr. McAdam asserts, the ethnic and racial diversity of participants at 2020’s Black Lives Matter demonstrations represents a marked change for anti-racism protests. Analysis of protesters across three different US cities in June 2020 – Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and New York City – finds that 54% of participants were White, reflecting a diversity of participation never before seen at anti-racism demonstrations. [3]

The diversity of participants at the BLM protests reflects a more general, public reckoning with systemic racism. “Before, there was a need to convince people that racism and implicit bias still exist in modern society, but 2020 has seen the bulk of the global community acknowledge that these things exist,” says Dr. Anatasia Kim, psychologist and author of *It’s Time to Talk (and Listen): How to Have Constructive Conversations About Race, Class, Sexuality, Ability, and Gender in a Polarised World*. “The question now is ‘what do we do about them?’” [4]

From social media posts to brand mission statements, expressions of so-called allyship have populated public discourse in the wake of the protests, but as BLM fades from news cycles, the onus is on brands and individuals alike to translate statements of intent into real change. Canvas8 spoke to Dr. Kim to get a better grasp on the concept of allyship, and how organisations can meaningfully take action against racism.

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### **Deep and unwavering commitment to equality**

The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in June 2020 brought the issue of racial injustice to the world stage. Amid global demonstrations and a colossal social media outcry, many brands and organisations were quick to add their voices to the discussion, but these declarations of solidarity and support didn't always land as intended. Dr. Kim highlights how reactive engagement with racial injustice falls short of true allyship: in their haste to publically align themselves with BLM, many companies failed to examine their complicity within the systemic oppression of Black people. "I've had many consultations with disgruntled employees, who say things like 'it's great that my company has put out a statement about racial inequality, but this is making me think about all the ways in which they haven't lived up to these principles,'" says Dr. Kim. [4]

The discrepancy between public statements and internal actions has become a key point of contention for many employees in the wake of BLM, with campaigns such as [Pull up or shut up](#) calling on brands to cut the performative lip-service and publicly acknowledge their internal lack of diversity. In line with growing demand for transparency on this matter, job-search engine Glassdoor has added a [rating feature for diversity and inclusion](#) that allows employees to anonymously rate their company's commitment to workplace equity. "Increasingly, the public wants to know 'are you really committed to this work? Are you doing this work when no one is watching?'" says Dr. Kim. "This has and will continue to be the litmus test of an organisation's true commitment and dedication to allyship." [4]

The NFL's engagement with BLM provides a key example of the hypocrisy of reactionary engagement. The league failed to back Colin Kaepernick's peaceful protest against police brutality back in 2016, so its statement of support for BLM when it became the subject of global headlines four years later was met with strong criticism. "You've done nothing but the exact opposite of what you describe here," says filmmaker Ava DuVernay. [5] Beyond engaging with an issue when it is in the news, Dr. Kim defines allyship as a continuous, life-long endeavour, and one that cannot be built upon foundations of historical inconsistency. "From my perspective, allyship is a deep and unwavering commitment to equality," she says. "It's about working relentlessly to interrogate ourselves, our organisations, and our communities to identify and then dismantle our biases and prejudices, which are so deeply entrenched and embedded – not only in society as a whole but at the very corners of our psyche." [4]

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Being an ally means standing up for the rights of others  
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### Allocation of time and resources to diversity, equality, and inclusion

Brands invested heavily in anti-racist messaging in the wake of BLM protests. According to Numerator, TV ad spend on racial justice messaging totalled \$1.6 million in the month leading up to 23 June 2020 – that's 5.75 times the total TV ad spend allocated towards racial justice messaging in 2018 and 2019 combined. [6] With 66% of Americans expecting brands to use their creative power to inspire engagement with racial justice, expenditure on this type of messaging presented a neat solution for organisations looking to align themselves with BLM. [7] But it's all too easy for brands to outsource their engagement with racial justice to a handful of creatives at an advertising agency. Beyond philanthropy and campaign messaging, brands should dedicate their time and financial resources to equality as a routine principle.

"The organisations that stand out for their dedication and commitment to allyship are those that have a permanent line item on their agenda dedicated to allocating time, budget, and resources towards equality," says Dr. Kim. Amid a pandemic and economic crisis, adding another item to the agenda is no easy task, but neither is combating systemic racism. "This is not an item you can wrap up in ten to 15 minutes, or even as a quarterly goal. It's an item that could potentially open Pandora's Box," explains Dr. Kim. "Organisations should be absolutely clear on the time, energy, and resources involved." [4] Too often, it's employees of colour that are enlisted to join task forces and help formulate DEI plans. As a result, many corporate equality initiatives are a double-edged sword for employees of colour: it's welcome news that their company is making an effort to address internal inequalities, but the additional labour often falls on them, without compensation or contributing to professional advancement. Such corporate initiatives don't truly prioritise tackling structural inequality, but rather treat diversity and inclusion as a tick-box exercise.

"Just as you wouldn't lean on a volunteer task force of employees to spearhead your compensation planning or finance operations, you shouldn't do the same with DEI," says Tara Johnson, a New York-based diversity consultant. [8] Beyond the work of a few members of a committee or task force, Dr. Kim says that companies need to rethink their attitudes towards who is responsible for allyship within their company. "The reality is that allyship has to be a robust approach that everyone takes. In any given organisation, there's a role of an ally for every single employee. There needs to be rigorous emphasis on the idea that everyone can and must do their own part." [4]

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Set aside time and resources to develop workplace allyship  
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### Negotiating difficult conversations

“As a clinical psychologist, I’ve noticed that – both at the individual and organisational level – people are having a hard time managing the strong and difficult emotions that invariably accompany conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion,” says Dr. Kim. “At the core of it is fear.” [4] Fear of saying the wrong thing, being misunderstood, or being cancelled can pose a significant barrier to conversations about structural inequality and discrimination. A 2019 study, for example, finds that men were less likely to engage with women at work in the wake of #MeToo for fear of being unfairly accused of inappropriate behavior. [9] Overcoming this discomfort is one of the first steps towards change.

When it comes to conversations about race, a lack of awareness of White identity, and the opportunities that it grants in society, can lead many White people to feel uncomfortable or even attacked by conversations about White privilege. Raising awareness of this sense of [White fragility](#), and how it works to shut down conversations about race, is essential to bring about change in this space. “Being an ally means that one has to be brave,” says Dr. Kim. “We have to be able to wrestle with uncertain and imperfect outcomes.” [4]

It’s important that companies carefully establish a clear format and direction for sensitive conversations about systemic inequality. In response to BLM protests in June 2020, LinkedIn rushed to hold a company-wide town hall on racial injustice, which was derailed when a stream of anonymous comments began to fill up the Q&A box questioning the validity of the discussion. [10] This example demonstrates the importance of establishing rules of engagement when opening the floor to discuss topics such as racial injustice. Basic steps such as setting a clear agenda and assigning someone to moderate the conversation could help to establish a clear direction for the meeting. [11] However, it’s also important to counterbalance agenda-orientated discussions of racial equity in the workplace with opportunities for employees to safely express their perspectives and experiences in more open, freer-flowing formats. Brands could do well to implement a programme of different discussion formats and styles to ensure the varied aspects of this conversation are comprehensively addressed.

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Brands can appeal by calling themselves out for past actions  
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## Insights and opportunities

### ***Diversity of thought facilitates innovation***

As the world grapples with challenges of the new normal, establishing greater diversity of thought within decision-making roles could be key to stimulating much-needed innovation. “We need cooperation and collaboration between representatives of different identities, experiences, and perspectives to maximise innovative potential,” says Dr. Kim. [4] As it stands, C-suite and decision-making roles continue to be dominated by White men. According to research by McKinsey, the representation of ethnic minorities on UK and US executive teams stood at only 13% in 2019. This is in spite of the fact that companies in the top quartile for ethnic diversity outperformed companies in the bottom quartile by 36% in profitability. [12] “Allyship and commitment to DEI work is a smart investment that directly relates to an organisation’s success,” says Dr. Kim. [4]

### ***Create opportunities for self-led learning***

The work of fighting systemic inequality shouldn’t fall to those on the receiving end of this oppression. Taking the struggle on as one’s own is one of the [key principles of allyship](#). In other words, it’s time for White people to take the lead when it comes to addressing racism. Organisations can create opportunities for this to happen by promoting resources for self-led learning, whether that’s through training programmes, media resources, or further educational opportunities. Doing so could limit some of the pressure felt by non-White employees to engage with discussions of racial injustice. Ben & Jerry’s has a long history of anti-racism activism, and the brand’s [podcast](#), *Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America* provides a key example of the types of resources that are useful in facilitating self-led learning by educating listeners on the historical context of the issue and how White supremacy continues to shape society.

### ***Acknowledge historical inconsistency***

For attempts at allyship to have any sense of credibility, they need to be consistent. Chiming in on the topic of racial injustice solely when it is in the news is, at best, short-sighted and, at worst, a way of covering up for previous poor form. The first step towards anti-racist action is acknowledging one’s complicit role in upholding systemic inequality. For brands and organisations who have upheld racist practices in the past, this means taking the time to apologise and establish an ongoing plan to correct previous wrongs. In May 2018, Starbucks’ shut 8,000 of its stores for [anti-bias training](#) following a racist incident at one of its branches. Describing the move not as a solution but as a ‘first step’, the company’s decision to forgo profit for the sake of anti-racist training is an example of the level of commitment needed to bring about change at a meaningful level. [13]

## Sources

1. [Jacobin](#) (June 2020)
2. [Dazed](#) (July 2020)
3. [Brookings](#) (July 2020)
4. Interview with Dr. Anatasia Kim conducted by the author
5. [Twitter](#) (May 2020)
6. [Numerator](#) (June 2020)
7. [Edelman](#) (June 2020)
8. [BBC News](#) (September 2020)
9. [Harvard Business Review](#) (October 2019)
10. [The Daily Beast](#) (June 2020)

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11. [\*Forbes\*](#) (June 2020)
12. [\*McKinsey\*](#) (May 2020)
13. [\*The Guardian\*](#) (May 2018)



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