

How marginalised professionals can cope with performative allyship

 By [Sindiwe Mbiko](#)

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With organisations buckling under global pressure to increase representation across all levels of corporate, many have taken this opportunity to reassess themselves and make some indelible and meaningful change within their companies.



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Performative allyship

However, for some, this has provided a masquerading opportunity, leading to a growing concern around 'performative allyship.'

Performative allyship refers to someone from a non-marginalised group professing support and solidarity with a marginalised group, but in a way that is not helpful. Peter Kalina from the Mayo Clinic made it apt when he said this performative allyship may in fact be harmful to "the cause".

This surface-level activism can take many forms, but at its core is its disingenuity. Marginalised people are placed in positions merely as tools, with no real intention of changing existing structures or policies, and with no vested interest in upskilling these individuals.

Throughout my 15 years traversing through agencies both big and small, White-owned and Black-owned, in advertising, marketing and public relations, I have experienced authentic and meaningful support from companies and leaders, but I've also experienced performative allyship myself and seen it take many forms.

Being put on a mantle

Ranging from individuals holding junior positions for well over 10 years, to young Black creatives being hauled into client pitch presentations for work they had absolutely no input into. Merely acting as showpieces, placed on a mantle for all to marvel at.



Obviously, this has its benefits; getting a salary with little to no expectations might even seem appealing. However, one thing is for sure, if someone is willing to pay a salary with no productivity expectation, it means that they're getting way more from keeping you there.

Lots have been written about this and I do not profess to be an expert in any way, however, I've learnt that there are three key things I can do myself to not get stuck in the hole that performative allyship digs for you:

1. **Have a personal development plan:** Having my personal goals has often helped anchor me in what I wanted from the experience – at any level. This is usually a document with set objectives and timelines. This also grounds me because I've realised that if I don't have my personal agenda written down, it's easy to become lost as others steer my path according to their own agendas.

This provides opportunity to assess myself and where I am by helping me understand my areas of growth, where I may have technical skills shortages and most importantly, how I will go about closing those gaps. I've come to understand that some of these objectives may not be met by my current employer but having them down allows me to do my research and identify people or organisations that can assist.

Lastly – and perhaps most dauntingly – I share my plan with my line manager. My current position has really demonstrated the importance of driving these conversations as a practice, and how this can positively shift one's career trajectory.

2. **Hold yourself and your manager accountable:** Sharing my plan with my manager has had several benefits; the most important being that it sets my expectations very clearly. Communicating my expectations closes all room for ambiguity or misalignment, and to a certain degree even outlines my expectation from them during my tenure.

Be very deliberate in setting out to achieve your objectives – do not allow this document to be something that takes up space in both your inboxes. Schedule regular catch-up sessions and ask for assistance where needed. While my line manager may not always be able to help with all my goals, it is their responsibility to become enablers rather than stumbling blocks.

3. **Have the difficult conversations:** There's absolutely nothing wrong with expressing frustration and concerns in a respectful manner. Difficult as it may be, it communicates my commitment to my own growth. More importantly, it puts up a mirror that has often allowed my managers to identify some of their blind spots.

One thing I often must remind myself is that no one is doing me a favour by hiring me. I am there because I worked

for it and I'm adding value. Many perpetrators of performative allyship often rely on us feeling indebted with the hopes that we never rock the boat by asking questions.

The reality is that wolves exist and they live amongst us, and while we may not always be able to spot them or even call them out when we do, our success still remains our responsibility and its crucial that you own it.

Being able to control as much of your narrative as possible is vital. As Gen-Z enters the working world the call to create space for marginalised communities is only going to grow louder and with a lot more gusto - which is most likely going to add to some of these complexities. Just make sure you don't get lost in all the noise.

ABOUT SINDIWE MBIKO

Sindiwe Mbiko is a senior brand PR and communications manager at Momentum Metropolitan.
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