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# Allyship in Mentoring:
# Being an Agent of Change



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## ABOUT MENTOR CANADA

Mentor Canada is the only national charitable organization dedicated to advancing mentoring across Canada. Through research, training, and capacity-building, Mentor Canada equips programs, organizations, and partners with the knowledge, tools, and resources needed to deliver high-quality mentoring. As a national convener, Mentor Canada works across sectors to close Canada's mentoring gap and increase access to meaningful mentoring opportunities

**Mission:**
To accelerate and scale world-class mentoring in Canada.

**Vision:**
We envision a Canada where mentoring is valued and accessible to all —grounded by evidence, rooted in collaboration, and driven by a dynamic ecosystem that unlocks potential, fuels opportunity and strengthens communities. Our impact is clear, and our reach is nationwide.

Mentorat QUÉBEC

## ABOUT MENTORAT QUÉBEC

**Mission:**
To foster and promote a culture of mentoring in Quebec by advancing knowledge, improving accessibility, and encouraging the practice of mentoring in all its forms and across all sectors.

**Vision:**
To be a leading voice in mentoring, empowering individuals to reach their full potential and organizations to thrive in an ever-evolving society.

We gratefully acknowledge the Mentor Me Equal Advisory Commitee for their contributions: Women of Steel - United Steelworkers, Pride at Work Canada, Eva Kwan - Psychology Specialist in Operational Space Medicine, Catalyste+, Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology (CCWESTT), Espace LGBTQ+, ECO Canada, CGI, Next Gen Men, and Accelerate Her Future.

Women and Gender Equality Canada | Femmes et Égalité des genres Canada | Canada

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Being an agent of change isn't a separate role you adopt on top of mentoring. It's what mentoring at its best actually looks like when you're working with someone whose experience of the world - and of the workplace - is different from your own.

This learning resource will help you understand what allyship looks like in practice, develop the self-awareness to mentor across differences effectively, and build concrete skills to act when it matters. It asks you to consider not just how you show up for your mentee one-on-one, but how you show up in the broader systems and spaces that affect them - your workplace, your team, the rooms your mentee doesn't have access to yet.

**A note before you begin:**

Allyship isn't costless. Showing up for your mentee (and for the broader culture you both operate in) means spending time, thought, and social or political capital you've built. It might mean saying something uncomfortable in a meeting, advocating for someone when it's not the path of least resistance, or doing the work of your own learning on your own time. That's worth naming honestly. The goal of this resource isn't to pretend those costs don't exist. It's to help you understand where you're willing and able to invest, and to give you the tools to do it well.

## WHAT MENTOR ALLYSHIP ACTUALLY MEANS

An ally is someone who uses their position, relationships, and influence to support people who face barriers, not only helping them overcome those barriers, but actively working to remove them. In a mentoring context, that might mean speaking up when you see your mentee overlooked, connecting them to opportunities they wouldn't otherwise access, or being honest with them about how the organization really works - including the unwritten rules that disadvantage some people more than others.

Allyship is not about being a spokesperson, a fixer, or a saviour. It's not about deciding what someone needs and acting on it without their input. And it's not a one time gesture. It's a practice; something you build into how you mentor, how you lead, and how you engage with the people around you.

It also creates real benefits for you and for the organization. Mentors who actively work across differences develop sharper judgment, stronger leadership instincts, and a broader perspective. Organizations where senior leaders model inclusive behaviour see better retention, stronger team performance, and more adaptive cultures. These aren't abstract outcomes. They're competitive ones.

*Before you act as an ally, ask. What your mentee wants and needs from you may be different from what you assume. You might have the authority or relationships to escalate something directly (report an incident, have a conversation with their supervisor, name something publicly) but that might not be what your mentee wants, and it might not be safe for them in the same way it is for you. Listen first. Then ask how you can help. Then act in the way they've mentioned is useful. Acting without their direction (even with the best intentions) centres your own sense of agency, not theirs.*

## UNDERSTANDING THE PEOPLE YOU'RE MENTORING

Equity deserving groups like women, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, racialized people, Indigenous communities, and people with disabilities face barriers in the workplace that aren't always visible to those who don't share the same lived experiences. These barriers are real, documented, and systemic. They show up in hiring, in performance reviews, in who gets sponsored and who gets overlooked, in who feels safe enough to speak up.

Two things are worth keeping in mind.

1. **First** the barriers people face are not uniform. A white woman and a woman of colour do not have the same experiences. While both may face gender-based barriers, women of colour can also encounter unique challenges related to racism, cultural stereotypes, and other intersecting forms of discrimination, highlighting that women are not a monolithic group. A person who is 2SLGBTQIA+ and has a disability navigates multiple overlapping identities, each of which interacts with the others in ways that are unique to them. This is what intersectionality means. It is not just that people have multiple identities, but that those identities compound both advantage and disadvantage in ways that can't be reduced to a single category. Your job as a mentor is not to categorize your mentee's experience but to stay genuinely curious about what theirs actually is.

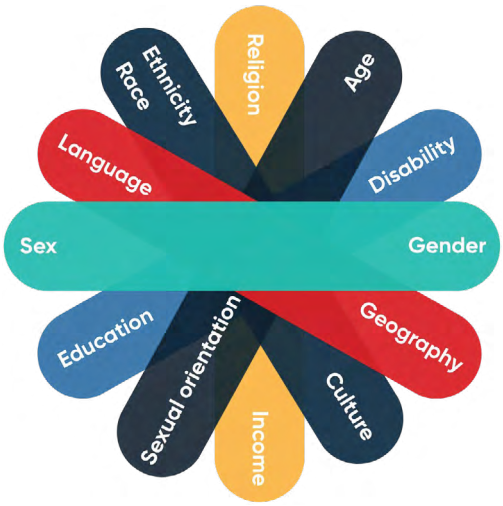
2. **Second** some people reading this may feel personally implicated by a discussion of systemic advantage. That's understandable. Recognizing that certain groups face structural barriers does not erase individual effort or merit. It is simply an honest acknowledgment that not everyone starts from the same place or navigates with the same headwinds. A mentor can hold both truths at once: that hard work matters and that context matters. For example, two workers can have the same talent and work ethic, but one may have to overcome barriers that the other never encounters. Recognizing this does not discount hard work—it provides important context for understanding different experiences.

## A LITTLE MORE ON INTERSECTIONALITY

*Intersecting Social Identity Factors: Understanding the Complexity of Identity*

### Definition of Social Identity:

- Various forms of social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, disability) intersect and overlap, influencing how individuals experience oppression and privilege.




### Why Intersectionality Matters in Mentoring:

- People's experiences are shaped by multiple identities that interact in different ways. Effective mentors not only seek to understand how these identities influence their mentee's experiences, but also reflect on their own identities, advantages, and challenges. This self-awareness helps mentors avoid assumptions and better support mentees whose experiences, opportunities, and barriers may be very different from their own.

**Intersectionality**. Intersectionality refers to the intersecting and overlapping nature of human identity[1]. In other words, as human beings, we all have multiple identities based on our race, religion, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability status, and so on.

The main idea behind intersectionality is that each of these different identities interacts with one another to either bring us **more advantage, or more disadvantage**, especially while seeking employment.

For example, an Indigenous youth who has a disability may experience both **racism and ableism** while seeking employment in Canada. As another example, a Black femaleidentifying youth who is queer and has a disability may experience racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism while applying for jobs. On the other hand, a white person who is also able-bodied, male-identifying, and heterosexual may unfairly benefit during their job search due to white privilege, ableism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity (i.e., a worldview that sees heterosexual as the standard or preferred sexual orientation).

However, a white disabled male also faces the complexity of Intersecting Social Identity Factors. As you can see, you may be advantaged in some identities while disadvantaged in others. Our different identities can bring us more power and opportunity or present us with more barriers and oppression.

*Intersectionality is an important concept for mentors to consider and keep in mind in their relationships. When mentors take the time to understand and respect the mentee's entire identity, they create the opportunity for deeper and more authentic relationships.*

[1] *Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139-167, https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/.*

## SELF-AWARENESS: THE FOUNDATION OF MENTORING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

The most important lesson in this resource isn't a tactic or a framework. It's the ability to decenter yourself - to notice when you're filtering your mentee's experience through your own frame, and to deliberately shift into theirs instead.

This is harder than it sounds. Most experienced leaders are used to pattern matching: you've seen similar situations before, you know what worked, and your instinct is to share it quickly. That instinct is often useful. But it can also cause you to project your own path, your own interpretation of a situation, or your own values onto someone whose context is meaningfully different from yours. Men in particular tend to move toward problem solving fast which can mean the mentee never fully gets to articulate what they're actually experiencing before advice starts arriving.

### What decentering looks like in practice:

- You notice your internal voice preparing a response while your mentee is still talking and you consciously set it aside to keep listening actively.
- Your mentee describes a situation that sounds familiar and instead of jumping to advice, you ask: "What does that feel like for you?" or "What do you need right now, to think it through out loud or to hear how I'd approach it?"
- You catch yourself framing feedback through your own career experience and pause to ask whether that frame actually applies to their situation, or whether it applies to yours.
- After a conversation, you ask yourself: Was I listening to understand, or listening to respond? Did I make space for them to lead?

### Know your biases - and keep learning about them:

Unconscious bias affects everyone. It shapes who we notice, who we assume is capable, who we think of first when an opportunity comes up. You don't eliminate bias by believing you don't have it - you manage it by staying honest about how it operates and actively correcting for it – and being open to the invisible being made visible even if uncomfortable.

- Attend unconscious bias training if you haven't. Not because it could eliminate some bias but because it surfaces how bias operates in systems and everyday decisions, which is where it actually matters.
- Read about power and privilege, microaggressions, and systemic barriers. Look for books, articles, and perspectives outside your existing network as the goal is to encounter viewpoints and experiences you wouldn't naturally come across.
- Seek out feedback from mentees and colleagues with different lived experiences about how you show up. Be open to what you hear through a growth mindset, even when it's uncomfortable.
- Ask for feedback on your mentoring style after a project or after navigating a difficult conversation and use it to adjust.

*Educating yourself is your responsibility, not your mentee's. People from equity deserving groups are not obligated to explain their experiences or teach you about the barriers they face. Some will have the capacity and inclination to do so. Others won't, and that's a reasonable position. Seek out resources, perspectives, and training on your own. Come to the relationship having already done some of that work.* Approach it with a genuine openness to learning and growth as your mentoring relationship evolves.

## CULTURAL HUMILITY

Cultural humility is the practice of approaching people with genuine openness to their background, perspective, and lived experience without assuming that your own worldview, communication style, or way of operating is the default or the standard to uphold.

It's different from cultural competence, which implies you can learn enough about a group to understand them. Cultural humility recognizes that you can't fully know another person's experience, and that the right posture is ongoing curiosity and learning mindset rather than assumed knowledge.

In a mentoring context, this means:

- Learning about different cultural norms around communication, hierarchy, feedback, and professional relationships. Recognizing that your mentee's approach may be shaped by a context different from yours, not deficient relative to it.
- Avoiding assumptions about what your mentee wants, needs, or values based on their identity or background. Ask open ended questions. Let them tell you.
- Be open to being called in—when a mentee or colleague lets you know that something you said or did had a different impact than you intended. Being called in is an invitation to reflect, learn, and strengthen the relationship, not an attack. These moments require trust and psychological safety, especially when power dynamics are involved and there is risk in speaking up. When you receive feedback with curiosity rather than defensiveness, you create space for greater candor, build trust, and encourage more honest dialogue in the future. Acknowledge the feedback, make any necessary adjustments, and move forward without over-explaining your intentions.
- Recognizing that updating your language, your framing, or your approach in response to what you learn is a sign of growth, not a concession.

## BUILDING A SPACE WHERE REAL CONVERSATIONS CAN HAPPEN

Psychological safety doesn't happen because you announce that your door is open. It happens because you demonstrate, over time, that it's actually safe to be honest with you.

For many mentors (especially those in senior roles) there is an inherent power dynamic at play. Your mentee may be uncertain about what they can say, how much they can share, or whether candour will be held against them. Telling them you're approachable doesn't resolve that

uncertainty. You have to build the conditions for trust through your actions, consistently, over time. Regardless of how vulnerable or approachable we think we are, we overestimate how safe people feel to be open with us.

Think of it less as a "safe space" and more as an intentional space. One you've deliberately constructed through how you show up, what you model, and what you make room for.

You build that space by going first; sharing about yourself.

### What vulnerability looks like in a mentoring context:

- Sharing a decision you'd make differently. A time you misjudged a situation, gave the wrong advice, or let a blind spot affect your judgment.
- Being honest about the limits of your own experience, rather than filling space with confidence or information you don't have.
- Acknowledging when a topic is outside your expertise and naming that directly instead of defaulting to advice anyway.
- Inviting feedback on how the mentoring relationship is working and genuinely receiving it when the answer is uncomfortable. Not just whether the mentee is progressing, but whether you're actually useful to them.

Also be mindful of accessibility in how you structure your sessions. Consider whether your meeting format, timing, location, and communication style work for your mentee or whether they work for you. Language barriers, neurodiversity, and remote versus in-person preferences all shape how comfortable and effective a mentoring conversation can be. Flexibility here is part of how you build the space.

## ALLYSHIP BEHAVIOURS IN PRACTICE

The behaviours below are what this learning resource is asking you to develop. For each one, there are practical notes and example language. Not scripts to memorize, but starting points you can adapt to what feels authentic for you.

### 1. Interrupting bias in real time

Bias in professional settings is rarely dramatic and shows up in subtle ways. It shows up when someone's idea gets talked over in a meeting and later credited to someone else. It shows up when the same behaviour gets described as "aggressive" in one person and "direct" in another. It shows up in who gets asked for their opinion and who doesn't. In mentoring relationships, bias can show up in assumptions about a mentee's capabilities, readiness, career interests, or potential, shaping the opportunities, encouragement, and guidance they receive.

You don't have to turn every instance into a confrontation. The goal is to name what happened, proportionately, so it doesn't just pass unmarked.

Situation: *You're in a meeting. Your mentee makes a suggestion that gets little response. Twenty minutes later, a colleague restates the same idea and it's praised.*

You could say something like:
*"Actually, [person] raised that point earlier. Just making sure it gets attributed correctly."*

*"I want to go back. [Person] said something similar a few minutes ago. I think it's worth exploring."*

"Hey, I think we just heard a version of what [person] suggested. Did we give that one a fair look?"

You can also follow up privately with your mentee afterward: *"I noticed what happened in that meeting. How are you feeling about it? Do you want to talk through how to handle it if it comes up again?"*

## 2. Sponsoring - not just mentoring

Sponsorship means using your reputation and relationships to actively create opportunities for your mentee. Not just advising them but advocating for them when they're not in the room. Women and racialized professionals are frequently over-mentored and underspon-sored: they receive plenty of guidance about how to navigate the system, but far fewer strategic introductions, visible endorsements, and direct advocacy.

Sponsorship is also a broader practice than just advocating for your mentee. It means actively expanding who gets named and considered in the first place. It means noticing when the same familiar names keep coming up (for promotions, assignments, or networking opportunities, for example) and asking whether the pool actually reflects the talent that exists in your organization.

Situation: *You're in a room where names are being floated for a high-visibility project or job opportunity. You notice the conversation is gravitating toward the same familiar people - the ones who are already visible, who you know well, who move through the organization with ease.*

This isn't usually conscious. It's the natural pull of familiarity and affinity. Your job is to notice it and actively correct for it.

You could say something like:
*"I want to make sure we're not just going to the same names we always go to. Who else has the skills for this project that we might not be thinking of?"*

*"[Person] would be strong for this opportunity, they've been working on exactly this kind of problem, and I'd recommend them."*

*"We keep landing on the same handful of people. Is that because they're genuinely the best best candidate, or because they're the most visible? It's worth asking."*

## 3. Responding to microaggressions

Microaggressions are brief, often unintentional comments or behaviours that communicate a demeaning or othering message based on someone's identity. They are called micro because they are individually small but they accumulate and their effect is significant.

As a mentor, you may witness them directed at your mentee. You may also, without realizing it, perpetuate them. Knowing how to respond is part of what this learning resource is asking you to develop. While also staying open to feedback when you've missed something.

Situation: *In a team setting, a colleague says something to your mentee that lands as othering - a comment on their accent, an assumption about their background, a backhanded compliment about how well they've done given where they're from. Your mentee looks uncomfortable but says nothing.*

You don't have to make it a lecture. Some options:

*"That's a bit of an odd thing to say. What did you mean by that?"*

*"I'm not sure that landed the way you intended it."*

Following up privately with your mentee: *"I noticed that comment. How are you doing? Do you want to talk through it?"*

Sometimes the most important thing is simply making sure your mentee knows you saw it.

## 4. Modeling inclusive communication

Inclusive communication is a practice you maintain, not a style you perform once. It means staying genuinely open to feedback about how your language and approach land and treating that feedback as useful information rather than criticism.

- Use the pronouns and language your mentee uses to describe their own identity. If you're unsure, you may ask in private, "What pronouns do you use?" It's a straightforward question and most people appreciate being asked. However, be mindful that some individuals might not feel comfortable or safe sharing their pronouns, and that is okay. Do not press the topic.
- If you use a term that lands wrong, don't over explain or get defensive. Acknowledge it, correct it, and move on. Modelling that recovery well is itself part of inclusive communication.
- Be aware that what feels direct, clear, or collegial to you may not land that way across different cultural backgrounds, communication styles, or power dynamics. Ask questions rather than assuming shared meaning.
- Avoid assumptions about what your mentee wants to hear or how they prefer to receive feedback based on their identity or background. Ask them.

## 5. Giving strengths-based feedback

Equity deserving individuals are often exposed to deficit based messages about their capabilities - from performance reviews, from managers, from broader societal signals.

Example of deficit based messaging: "This neighbourhood is full of people who need saving because they can't help themselves."

As a mentor, you have an opportunity to consistently counter that type of messaging by identifying and naming what your mentee is genuinely good at and helping them see their own potential clearly.

This isn't about false positivity. It's about being intentional and honest about strengths, not just gaps.

- Before a feedback conversation, ask yourself: Am I giving this feedback in a way that would read the same way if this person had a different identity? Bias shows up in feedback - in the words chosen, in what gets named as a strength versus a liability, in how the same behaviour gets framed differently depending on who's displaying it.
- Promote positive self talk and self advocacy. Help your mentee articulate their own strengths and achievements in ways they can use in performance conversations, in interviews, and in negotiations.
- Believe in your mentee's potential, including for roles and opportunities that might feel like a stretch. Part of sponsorship is encouraging ambition that the mentee themselves might be hesitant to voice.

Deficit-based messaging emphasizes shortcomings, while strength-based messaging recognizes existing strengths, knowledge, and potential.

## 6. Advocating within organizational systems

The most durable form of allyship isn't what you do in one-on-one conversations. It's what you do in the rooms your mentee doesn't have access to yet and how you talk about equity in leadership meetings, whether you challenge policies and practices that create unequal outcomes, and whether you use your influence to shift the conditions that produce the barriers in the first place.

- Raise equity related concerns when you have standing to do so — in performance calibrations, hiring decisions, project assignments. You don't have to do it alone, but you do have to do it.
- If your organization has policies or norms that create unequal outcomes for certain groups, name that when you see it. Change at the organizational level requires people with influence to be willing to say something.
- Model inclusive leadership visibly. How you behave as a leader signals what the organization values and what it tolerates. Your team is watching.

## A NOTE ON SCOPE

This resource is asking you to be a more aware and active mentor, and ally. It is not asking you to become an expert, a legal advisor, or an HR intermediary.

Mentors can helpfully acknowledge that certain protections exist and point mentees toward formal channels and support. But detailed legal guidance is outside the scope of mentoring and should be referred to HR, legal support, or an employee assistance program. Knowing how to connect your mentee to the right resource is itself a meaningful act of support and allyship.

Focus on what you can do: listen well, act on what you've heard, create opportunities, and use your influence with intention.

## CLOSING REFLECTION

Before you close this section, take a few minutes with these questions. There are no right answers. The point is to be honest with yourself.

- Think about a recent mentoring conversation. Were you mostly listening to understand, or listening to respond? What would you do differently?
- Allyship requires commitment, time, and a willingness to step outside your comfort zone. Where are you genuinely willing and able to take action? Where do you hold back, and what's actually driving that? What would it take to show up differently in one of those spaces?
- Is there an area of self-education you've been meaning to pursue (for example, antiracism, accessibility, or 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion)? What's been getting in the way, and what would help you take the first step this week?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The resources below are worth your time if you want to go deeper. Each one is listed with a note on why it's relevant — because without that context, most people won't opt into additional reading, and that's a fair position.

- **Bystander Intervention Strategies (Right To Be / Government of Canada):** Gives you a practical framework for the moment when you witness bias or harm and don't know what to do. The 5Ds (Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay, Direct) are concrete options so you're not frozen. Directly relevant to the interrupting bias section of this resource.
- **Cultural Humility Training (Mentor Canada):** Expands directly on the cultural humility section of this resource. Worth doing before or alongside your mentoring relationship if you're working with someone whose cultural background is different from yours.
- **Unconscious Bias Training (equity workshops, employer offered programs, or online options):** Relevant to the self awareness section. Look for programs offered through your employer, professional association, or equity certification providers. The goal isn't to emerge bias free but to develop a clearer picture of how bias operates in the specific decisions and dynamics you navigate.
- **The Wheel of Privilege and Power**
- **Types of Microaggressions**
- **Inclusive Language in the workplace**



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