



HOW TO BE AN ALLY TO ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISTS OF COLOR

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This guide is based on a panel at the Society of Environmental Journalist's annual conference in 2023.

What are your suggestions for starting a conversation around DEI in the newsroom?

RR: There is strength in numbers. In addition to consulting with The Uproot Project, join the [DEI Coalition for Anti-Racist, Equitable and Just Newsrooms](#) — it's a digital community space that OpenNews launched back in March 2021 that's dedicated to sharing knowledge and taking concrete action in service of a more anti-racist, equitable and just journalism industry.

If you're a non-BIPOC journalist, define what allyship means to you (See number 3), what your intentions are, and why you think it's important to start DEI conversations in the newsroom. Once you answer these questions, it's your job to uplift the voices of the minority in the newsroom. Suggest actions like calling for a newsroom town hall focused on DEI.

Be prepared for uncomfortable conversations. Be prepared to show empathy to people in your newsroom that are often overlooked (i.e., journalists of color, queer journalists, young journalists, etc), and make sure you are supporting them and one another in these conversations.

MS: Reach out to your colleagues and gather thoughts on what they would like their DEI conversation/town hall to focus on. There are so many topics that can happen, and it's good to focus on a few, tackle those, and then focus on others.

JW: There is strength in numbers. Find others in the newsroom concerned about DEI issues. Sometimes, change begins with casual conversation that can lead to more formalized committees, initiatives, etc. For non-journalists of color, be sure to listen to your JOC counterparts.

Newsroom leaders should evaluate how they cover race, DEI issues, etc. Coverage is a signal to JOC employees of an organization's inclusivity.

How to start a DEI committee in your organization if there isn't one:

RR: Be prepared to put in EXTRA work. Starting a DEI committee within an organization means you are going to have to push conversations and convince higher-ups why this is an initiative worth investing in. In other words, you need to learn how to become a better leader and organizer first.

According to DEI Coalition founder Sisi Wei, you have to understand how to intentionally and strategically create big change. "The kind of change that's so powerful that it can literally move mountains — because the cultural change journalism needs right now shares the same enormity and necessary permanence."

As a journalist, it's your job to interview community members, public officials, scientists, and other experts for stories. Do the same thing when it comes to starting a DEI community. Figure out the needs of people in the newsroom and also the different avenues you need to take, the Goliaths you need to fight in order to start a committee. Know the barriers and also possibilities to move forward.

Once you've done that, figure out logistics. Keep the conversation rolling. Be consistent. Never drop the ball.

MS: When talking with higher-ups on establishing a DEI committee, be ready with some topics the committee will focus on. Like source tracking, bringing in guests speakers from other orgs to talk about how to cover certain communities and issues, hiring and retention of BIPOC staff, what mentorship and resources will be offered for journalists, etc. From there, be prepared to work out how this will happen and make sure all members of the committee are engaged. Create guidelines/structure the committee will follow during meetings and make sure not to burn out.

Do you have any tips on advocating for better support of JOC in the newsroom?

RR: Think of allyship as some sort of friendship, partnership, or significant camaraderie. It's a state of being, which means you have to be consistent in helping others over time. Change doesn't happen overnight.

According to members of the DEI Coalition, you can think about allyship like this: "If an action is a one-off, even if it is positive, that's when motives are questioned, and you hear the term 'performative allyship.' Do you have [that journalist's] back just in a one-on-one conversation, or do you also have their back in a meeting with the whole department?"

Another member said, "consider why you're feeling pulled to talk about your support for your teammate in these terms. For example, if it's based on an ongoing commitment to use your influence, resources, and relationships on behalf of this teammate, that's a green flag. If it's based on feelings of fear or anxiety about your own reputation and how you're perceived, that's a sign to dig deeper on your own or with people you trust so you can better understand what's going on internally first."

Acknowledge the power dynamics. As a manager, you shouldn't ask or expect your employee to tell you if or when you're being problematic. That's a big ask. Uneven power dynamics remain even if allyship is professed. Take a step back and assess interactions or how you approach things. Next, think about trust. Trust breeds trust, and it takes a lot of work to foster trust over time, especially on an unfair playing field.

JW: Listen and try to understand where your JOC counterparts are coming from. For non-JOC, do not assume that your JOC counterparts always have the time, energy, bandwidth, etc., to take on DEI work. While many will be eager, remember that it is extra work.

Do you have any tips or suggestions on addressing a lack of diversity in the newsroom?

RR: Make sure you actually have the demographic breakdown of your newsroom handy. Analyze and point out the gaps to know which departments or teams lack diversity, followed by why diversity is needed.

Bring it up to HR or your DEI team. Set up a meeting and make the case.

It doesn't have to be you. Again, there is strength in numbers. Find an ally or someone else to go with you.

MS: Ask for meetings with higher-ups as a committee to address the issue and bring it to the forefront of their attention. Ask them to establish plans on how they will address it. Don't establish the plans for them, they need to understand it's their job as supervisors and higher ups to come up with a feasible plan and have them realize what they have in place is not working. From there, ask them to share their plans and then create a timeframe for accountability.

JW: Of course, it's important to seek out diverse candidates, but before that, it's worth evaluating and addressing reasons why JOC may be reluctant to apply or want to work in your newsroom in the first place. Does your organization have a history of publishing questionable content? What would past and present JOC say about the work environment? Does your organization have diverse leadership—and are those leaders empowered? Addressing those issues may be a prerequisite to recruiting more diverse talent.

How can people support other JOC in their newsrooms?

RR: Create a Slack group or in-person meet ups outside of the work setting to check in on one another. Trust is key. It will all be off the record. Empathize with each other, because more often than not, the other JOC has likely or is experiencing whatever struggle you might be experiencing and vice versa.

JW: Check in on your colleagues periodically—formally and informally. A simple conversation can help colleagues get through challenging situations and lead to bigger organizational solutions.

How to address racism in the newsroom:

RR: Know and ground yourself in your organization's values. During the unrest that ensued after George Floyd's murder, newsrooms across America began to reckon with their racial biases and values. Many launched teams to specifically cover race and inequality. At the time, employees felt the motivation and courage to speak out and call out the systems of oppression, including their newsrooms, underscoring how silence means complicity.

Have 1-on-1 meetings with people you know might feel the same way as you, and call for a larger team meeting. Have a clear list of what you're calling for, whether it's being more transparent about salaries, raising a concern about a specific article or coverage, or hiring more diverse team members. It will be scary, but you must invite and engage in a more honest conversation about race and identity in newsrooms. What's being ignored? Who's at the table making decisions for marginalized groups? Give specific examples and come up with better ways to address them collectively as a team.

JW: Figure out who in newsroom leadership is the best ally who will respond appropriately to reports of racism. Egregious racism (incidents, language, etc.) should be called out and addressed immediately. If you

have the emotional bandwidth, take the time to explain more subtle instances of racism to help explain the need for bigger organizational changes.

Further reading:

Power Shift and the Workplace Integrity training program: They offer free train-the-trainer seminars or can help connect newsrooms with existing trainers to come in. It would be a structured way for a newsroom to start self-reflection or give their folks a refresher. They have some training on YouTube, but the seminars they teach tend to be hands-on and discussion-driven instead of just listening.

- <https://www.freedomforum.org/power-shift-project-for-workplace-integrity/>

Heather Krause's We All Count: This project focuses specifically on equity/accuracy in data analysis and study design. Again, she has some short videos on YouTube that can be a starting point.

- <https://weallcount.com/>

Here's the Equity Checklist: It's a one-page document created by a group of folks at Gannett and a recording of a training introducing it. This can be helpful for self-reflection on a story or beat.

- <https://training.usatodaynetwork.com/2022/10/27/10-ways-to-achieve-equity-in-your-storytelling/>