

Bitesized Belonging: What does performative mean?

One of the first missteps many of us make on our journey to being better allies and advocates is falling into the trap of being performative. But what does that mean?

Performative activism—or allyship—are actions a person takes to increase one’s social capital rather than because of one’s devotion to a cause. These actions are typically shallow in their effect, with little impact. This often results in self-centering behavior where a person—or business, organization, etc.—takes small, public moments to reassure others of their intentions without connecting back to results.

Let’s break that down with some examples:

- A business might demonstrate performative behaviors during Pride Month by changing their logo to a rainbow flag despite not having an LGBTQ+ ERG or inclusive policies. More recently this has been referred to as “Rainbow Washing”.
- A person might be acting performatively if they talk about being an ally but don’t connect that allyship back to action or actively seek to make changes to the systems they say they are advocating for. Like posting about a cause on social media without doing much else.

Many new allies—or allies in bad faith—and organizations fall into the trap of performative activism and end up doing more harm than good.

Luckily, there are simple steps for mitigating these problems.

- Take self-inventory. Ask yourself “why” you’re doing something before you do it. Are you turning your profile picture black in support of Black folks without having done anything else to support those communities?
- Assess your reactions. Allies are open to criticism and are willing to sit with feedback and process how they can be better allies. Those falling prey to performative behaviors are often defensive and even hostile when confronted with critiques. Which are you?
- Where does your desire meet action? Are you involved in a company ERG? Do you volunteer your time to a community group or cause? Do you have the fiscal means to support organizations that do work you find meaningful? If the answer is consistently “no” but you still identify as an ally, you might have need to consider whether your allyship is performative.
- Do you value self-education? Allies are always learning, always taking time to immerse themselves in the communities they want to serve. When was the last time you sought out a book, podcast, article, or group focused on causes you support? Do you take time to routinely grow your knowledge on these complex issues?

Exercise: Take some time this week and consider the following:

- Who do I seek to be an ally to?
- How have I supported the communities I want to serve?
- Where am I offer my time, financial resources, mentorship/sponsorship, expertise, creativity, and/or other forms of support?

How can I stay accountable to myself? (Share some of these!)