

PUBLICATION

Common Ground: "If We're Not Allies, Who Will Be?"

Authors: Reba Letsa, Jennifer L. Curry
Third Quarter 2021

Reba Letsa Interviews Jennifer L. Curry

It's no secret that organizations that foster strong allyship have more innovative, satisfied, and productive teams. This is because allies, through intentional and conscious efforts, use their power, privilege, and voices to amplify the voices of their colleagues and peers so that we are all heard and feel valued in our workplaces. An ally is someone who takes the time to educate themselves on the experiences of others, while building a relationship of trust and confidence with people from traditionally marginalized groups; when all are made to feel comfortable and have a safe space to bring ideas to the table, then collaboration and innovation increase, resulting in ideas that can drive an organization forward.

For this reason, organizational leaders often make the most impactful allies, which is why I am glad to have the opportunity to talk with my mentor, Jennifer Curry, a shareholder in our Baltimore office and vice chair of Baker Donelson's Labor & Employment group, about her ongoing journey with allyship and what being an ally means to her. She also shares some great book recommendations!

Reba: Let's jump right in. The most basic definition of allyship is that an ally is someone who utilizes their power, resources, and privilege to uplift and advocate for people in underrepresented groups by promoting a culture of equity and inclusion. What does allyship mean to you? Why do you think that allyship is important?

Jennifer: To me, allyship first and foremost means recognizing my own privileges and the advantages, resources, and opportunities that I have been given because of the color of my skin. From within this framework, allyship means using my power in a strategic way to fight against biases and injustices through both personal relationships and public acts of sponsorship and advocacy. While pushing systemic improvements in hiring and promotion policies and practices is important, allyship requires a more personal commitment to the women and people of color around me. By fostering those relationships, promoting those individuals, and acting as a navigator and advocate, I can do my best work as their ally.

Reba: I agree, being an ally requires a personal commitment, which includes taking the time to educate yourself by reading, listening, watching, and deepening your understanding of the experiences of people of color or people of traditionally underrepresented groups. During our check-in meetings I have really appreciated your recommendations of books and shows that highlight these experiences and stories. What are some other ways that you educate yourself on the experiences of people of color and how do you think that taking the time to do so makes you a stronger ally? Do you have any book recommendations for others looking to educate themselves and become stronger allies?

Jennifer: I actually minored in African American studies in college. I don't know that I can say that I was drawn to that program because I was looking for something specific, but I had an amazing history professor (I was a history major) who happened to be African American, and I wanted to take all of her classes. She pushed me to read DuBois, Douglass, Branch, and Baldwin. Ever since those courses, I have had a deep desire to learn more about that struggle and what role I can play to lessen that struggle in any way I can. As you mentioned,

one of the ways that I have continued that "education" is by reading works of fiction from Black authors all over the world. I recognized long ago that I grow tremendously as a person – intellectually, culturally, and emotionally – when I read works of fiction, particularly by authors who have lived a very different life than my own. There are several books I have read over the last few years that have been eye-opening, including *The Underground Railroad*, *The Sellout*, and *The Vanishing Half*. I highly recommend each of them.

Reba: Thanks for sharing those recommendations! I think that in addition to learning the stories told by authors you admire, your colleagues and other people in your personal life who may have different backgrounds and experiences, through being an ally you can also learn a lot about yourself as well. What have you learned about yourself through being an ally to others in our Firm?

Jennifer: I've learned that I still have a lot of biases that I need to check and push through. My biases aren't about skin color, but they exist, and I recognize that I'm still a work in progress in that department. I think we probably all are in one way or another.

Reba: Along these same lines, and you touched on this earlier, there are certain privileges that we all hold, and being an ally first and foremost requires recognizing those advantages, opportunities and resources that privilege can afford. How do you continue to check in with yourself to ensure that you are acknowledging your privilege and how do you encourage other allies in our community to be conscious of privileges that they hold?

Jennifer: I have conversations with my friends and colleagues who are people of color. I ask them directly about their experiences and their perspective. I would never guess to understand what another person has experienced or how they feel. I believe that the only way I can empathize is by getting the information directly from the source. From my perspective, too much of how we have operated up until now has been based on assumptions. We all do it. We assume that we know what someone else is thinking and feeling because we know how we think and feel. This is how women and people of color have been marginalized – we substitute our voice for theirs based on our assumptions. We have to push out of that and start coming from a different place. I encourage all of my colleagues to ask questions and listen.

Reba: I think that such a large part of ensuring that these conversations continue, particularly in the workplace, is that leaders keep diversity and inclusion top of mind during the recruitment process. In addition to serving as a mentor to myself and other associates in our Firm, you are also on the Recruitment Committee for the Baltimore office. How do you think that your being an ally plays a role in ensuring that our Firm hiring is being carried out with intentionality?

Jennifer: I make sure that I am outspoken in insisting on interviewing and hiring diverse candidates, who might have backgrounds and experiences that many see as "unique" or "interesting." Just because someone has a resume that looks different than the rest of ours, does not make them less qualified. In fact, I would argue it may make them more qualified because they bring a different perspective to the table that we are likely missing. It is important that we are purposeful about pushing to see past what we expect and put value in strength through diversity.

Reba: We both served as facilitators for the diversity, equity and inclusion learning sessions that our Firm held and in one of our training sessions, we were asked to identify groups of individuals in the Firm who fall into 'insider' and 'outsider' categories. When it was our group's time to share you encouraged me to share my perspective first. As a leader in our Firm, you, and others in your position, have the ability to model the inclusive behaviors that we are all striving for and amplify the voices of others so that we all have the opportunity to be heard. Why do you believe that it is important for individuals in leadership roles in any workplace to be allies?

Jennifer: If we're not allies, who will be? We can't expect any industry or business to change if the leaders don't promote and practice allyship themselves. We all take cues from our leaders to understand our cultures and expectations. I want to work in a place where we are all valued for our individualism because it will make us smarter, stronger, more agile, and better prepared for the future.