Allyship Training Materials

Ok folks, here’s my attempt at a crash course in ally training! I’m really not sure whether I’ve covered everything we need to cover in here, but this is all a great starting point, and we can then talk about what you think I’ve missed, what doesn’t make sense, and generally just see how much ground we can cover in our next get-together. Please let me know if you want any more reading/watching on any of these topics – I’m more than happy to send you additional stuff!

Creating Safe Spaces

Safe spaces are created to make it possible for everyone to talk about what’s on their mind freely, while feeling reassured that they will not be attacked for their comments. This does not mean that they will not be disagreed with. Disagreement is guaranteed. It does mean that people have a right to expect that disagreement is directed at the content of the discussion, rather than personal attacks. General rules for safe spaces are as follows:

Share the air. If you have been dominating the conversation or participating disproportionately, let others participate. Alternatively, if you haven’t said much, you are invited to participate more.

Listen actively. This means respecting others when they are talking (one diva, one mic) and giving them your full attention.

Speak to your own experience. This often helps with avoiding generalizations and also the dynamic of explaining back to someone about their own oppressions they face.

Disagree with content, not people. Don’t be afraid to respectfully challenge people’s ideas, but refrain from personal attacks. (but also see section on “tone policing” below)

Use "I" statements. Talk about your own experiences – do not generalize.

Everybody’s right, but only partially. The goal is not to agree, but to gain deeper understanding. Remember that your experiences of how the world works and how society treats you are not the same as anyone else’s.

Use "both/and" rather than "either/or" thinking. Someone else may be making a good point that you may miss if you’re concentrating on disagreeing with part of it. Agree with the parts you agree with, and disagree with the parts you don’t.

Intent ≠ impact. When you say something harmful, it still hurts whether or not you meant it to. If you tread on someone’s foot and they tell you it hurt, you apologise and step off. You don’t spend time explaining that you didn’t mean to step on them, and so therefore they shouldn’t be hurt.
**Lean into discomfort.** Often the most progress is made in discussions about racism by really honing in on what we don't want to talk about.

**Be aware of power dynamics in the room.** This should include who is not present. Privilege is an important concept to understand (see below).

**Confidentiality.** What is said here stays here. What is learned here leaves here.

**Real talk.** Often there is a tendency to academify the discourse and speak in more abstract and less concrete terms. While academic discussions do have an extremely important role, academification often acts to sanitize or dilute the conversation to make it more palatable to people in dominant groups by providing distance from the real impacts of racism and other forms of oppression.

**Oops, ouch.** Part of having these conversations is messing up. (Oh, how I've messed up.) If you say something that is hurtful or problematic and you realize it, you can say "oops" to acknowledge it and then try again. Alternatively, if someone else said something harmful or problematic then you can say "ouch" which serves as a marker that there's something that needs to be discussed further. The specific words "oops" and "ouch" aren't necessarily used all that often, but the intent of this agreement can be met with other ways of bringing this up.

**Be aware of intersectionality.** People have intersecting identities and the experiences of white, straight, able-bodied women are not necessarily the same as the experiences of women of colour, lesbians/bisexual women, and women with disabilities. Despite this, when people talk about "women," they almost always mean straight, white, able-bodied women.

**Take 100% responsibility.** For your own statements, and for the discussion as a whole. Along these lines, it is important to remain accountable for our words and actions.

**Challenge the facilitator.** The people facilitating the discussions are not the experts and there will be times where we make mistakes and say things that are harmful. Never be afraid to call in a facilitator.

**What a Safe Space is not**
The most important thing to understand about safe spaces is that it doesn’t mean that they are *comfortable* spaces, especially for people in the majority group. Talking about privilege, sexism, racism, and any other -ism is likely to be inherently uncomfortable for many people in the room, particularly people who don’t belong to marginalized groups. People of colour, women, and individuals who belong to any other marginalized group tend to hold their tongues when in a room with people from the dominant group. They do this because any typical room is not a safe space for them to express their true opinions without risk of someone telling them that they are wrong, or they’re over-sensitive, or they just misunderstood. In this Community of Practice, we are going to be encouraging people to say what they
really think, and this could be a shock to some people, and make them feel very uncomfortable. This is good! It means we are learning!

It’s also important to remember that different people experience any space (including NCAR|UCAR) in different ways. There’s a raft of research out there that shows that people from minority groups find most spaces less welcoming than people in the majority. For example, a survey of college students found that, while 90% of straight students described their campuses as “friendly,” 76% of LGBTQ students described those same campuses as “homophobic.”

Typical responses to the shock of hearing other people’s experiences are to become defensive or upset, or to feel horribly guilty (in race work, this is a well known reaction called “White Guilt.”). All of these feelings are natural, are never pleasant, but are part of learning. These feelings do not mean that a space is not safe. They just mean that some of the people in the room are being challenged on their assumptions and worldview, and are experiencing this kind of discomfort for the first time. A lot of our work as facilitators is going to be helping people understand this, and guiding them to react appropriately. The following is an excellent article on this: [http://womeninastronomy.blogspot.com/2015/04/i-was-wrong-and-i-am-sorry.html](http://womeninastronomy.blogspot.com/2015/04/i-was-wrong-and-i-am-sorry.html) that I’ll refer to repeatedly throughout this document, as it hits many of the points I’ll be making.

**What is Privilege?**

Privilege is a tricky word for people to understand at first. Having privilege does not mean that your life has been easy. What it does mean is that for one of more of your characteristics, society is more attuned to your needs, role, and expectations than those of people without that privilege. There are many different types of privilege – white privilege, male privilege, straight privilege, able-bodied privilege, socioeconomic, body size, attractiveness, religious, citizenship, the list goes on. It’s important to note that none of these privileges cancel each other out – they all exist on separate axes. As a white lesbian from a middle-class family with a high education level and a good income, I have white, socioeconomic and educational privilege, but do not enjoy male or straight privilege. These things do not cancel each other out. I still experience sexism and homophobia, while not having to deal with racism or the struggle of working a minimum wage job.

There are a few articles worth starting with about privilege – I’d read these four, and then we can talk about it:


This is Peggy McIntosh’s seminal piece on white privilege.


(there are some issues with this article that have been pointed out by people of colour – most notably that when you get to your destination, you can get off your
bike, whereas people of colour can’t change their skin - but it’s a pretty good place to start.)

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gina-crosleycorcoran/explaining-white-privilege-to-a-broke-white-person_b_5269255.html

http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/15/straight-white-male-the-lowest-difficulty-setting-there-is/
(this didn’t really do it for me, but other people have really liked it).

How to effectively call someone out/in
People are going to mess up (guaranteed). When they do, we need to have a way to talk to them about it effectively. Often we talk about “calling out” someone who has said something offensive, or had an “oops” moment. I prefer to talk about “calling in,” which assumes that everyone wants to do the right thing, just needs a bit of help getting there. A colleague once referred to it as “no white person left behind,” which really made me laugh because it was so apt. Always remember that calling someone in is a brave thing to do. No-one wants to do it because it’s risky – people often don’t react well to being called in (see below, under “how to apologise”), and so it puts the person doing it at risk of personal attack. Again, the Women in Astronomy blog post at http://womeninastronomy.blogspot.com/2015/04/i-was-wrong-and-i-am-sorry.html is a great primer for the whole situation. We can also mitigate some of the bad feelings by ensuring that we call in people’s words, rather than their intent. See this video for an example of what I mean by that:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0Ti-gkjJXc

Tone Policing
Tone policing is a derailment tactic often used by people in positions of privilege to negate someone’s point because of the way they are making it. It is important to understand that many of the topics we will be talking about are emotional issues for people who live this stuff every day. While some people in the room are able to talk about these things in a detached way, others are not, and should not be expected to. White people, in particular, have been taught that anger, and making a point loudly, are unacceptable ways to communicate, and often say things like “no-one will listen to you if you’re shouting at them” or “I’m not going to talk to you while you’re addressing me like that,” or “I know you’re angry, but…” We need to understand that people who have been marginalized do not have the luxury of emotionally distancing themselves from conversations about their rights and experiences. It’s not an academic discussion for them. Disagreement with their points is fine, but policing their tone, or negating the content of their remarks just because of how they state them is absolutely not. More here:
How to apologise properly
Getting called out/in sucks. Really, really sucks. It’s embarrassing, it’s excruciating, you feel attacked, like you’re about 2 inches tall, and it’s a miserable experience. The first reaction anyone has is to defend themselves. Don’t do this. Remember that being called in is a gift from a very brave person, who was willing to put their own safety and comfort on the line to help you become better educated. The following 2 posts are superb explanations of how to appropriately react to being called in.

http://womeninastronomy.blogspot.com/2015/04/i-was-wrong-and-i-am-sorry.html (again! Jessica really nailed it!)
http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/11/how-to-apologize/ (this is a super video)

Definition of racism/sexism/other -isms
Just a language primer for you all – racism (or any other –ism) is not the same as being racially prejudiced against any racial group. Racism, though, is racial prejudice + power. This means that a white person can be racist towards a person of colour, but a person or colour, while they can be racially prejudiced towards white people, cannot be racist. People of colour hold less privilege, and therefore less power.
Here’s an excellent video that really gets at this point:
http://mahalonottrash.blogspot.com/2014/12/how-reverse-racism-works.html

Suggestion for a future discussion
I fell across this video today while looking for stuff for you all to read/watch. Maybe a topic for future discussion? 😊

“An offhand sexist comment enrages Renee Hlozek, and leads her to dig into how her colleagues really view people who aren't the stereotypical scientist.”
http://storycollider.org/podcast/2015-04-23