



# ASK AMANDA

## **Dear Amanda,**

*I want to be a better public ally to marginalized groups, but I'm afraid to do something wrong and get "cancelled." How can I help and learn more without overstepping?*

## **Dear Member,**

Your question about "cancel culture" and not overstepping is very common. We are living in a time where social media and commentary about who we are and what we're doing wrong is constant. Just take a breath. You don't live in social media land. You're a lawyer. You work in a field that doesn't post daily lists of who has screwed up. Also, keep in mind, some of the individuals you're seeing online are just performing without actually working to truly undo injustice. I have a few suggestions and things to think about, and like anything related to equity work, there are no easy or black and white solutions.

When you say "public ally," what I hear is that you would like to make your stance known. You don't need to have the hottest take. You can echo and amplify the sentiments of people around you who have lived experience or more knowledge in these areas. If you were previously silent in meetings, you can start speaking up in those spaces by agreeing with perspectives and voicing your concerns if certain perspectives aren't being heard.

Don't start by leading. After the summer of 2020, people who were suddenly invested in racial justice took over workplaces, disregarded the work that was already being done, and tried to lead with no experience. People from dominant groups can take that domination into social justice work and they did. It is always important to recognize that no matter what issue of marginalization it is, people have been hard at work for decades, and centuries in some cases, to build movements related to it, and you need to find what your role is within that movement.

## **Build trust and learn vulnerability**

One of the things that scares most of us about being cancelled or getting called out is how quickly people react to missteps. We need to slow down. If you are working on your consciousness, you need to focus on building trust with marginalized people. In order for learning to happen, people need to trust and be able to be vulnerable with each other and that takes time. Vulnerability is the ability to open yourself up authentically and in ways that risk negative feedback or rejection. What you are expressing is a fear of being vulnerable. People from dominant groups struggle to be vulnerable because part of domination is valuing invulnerability. People from marginalized groups value vulnerability and sharing in personal interactions because it builds trust<sup>1</sup>. Think about whether you are willing to be vulnerable enough to learn. I say this as someone who had to learn it myself.

I also turn to bell hooks' definition of dominator culture when I think of how hard we are on each other when we are learning. She described dominator culture as a culture that values control over others, interpreting all relationships as power struggles<sup>2</sup>. I must admit that over the years, my insecurities about my own actions made me hard on others who were trying to learn because I perceived domination as the only way to be right. I think if we are truly trying to undo all aspects of oppression, most people reading

this have something to teach and something to learn. Sometimes we are harder on people who are trying than we are on people who are overtly racist, or sexist, or homophobic. You are learning. I am still learning. People who cancel people are still learning too, even if they don't want to admit it.

### **Think *with* not *for***

One of the ways to cope with this anxiety is to have some awareness about when you are focusing too much on yourself as opposed to doing what you see needs to be done. The goal is working with others to strategically dismantle systems of oppression. Allyship implies that you are "helping" others as opposed to being personally invested in these changes. There are plenty of people who don't think I as a white woman have anything to offer these discussions. I understand the sentiment, but it dismisses the long history of white people fighting for racial justice, a history most people don't learn in school. There will always be disagreement about the roles that people play in different movements and I have had to learn to be in this ambiguous space. It's not comfortable, and it shouldn't be, but I focus on the work.

Try to envision yourself standing inside the work instead of thinking of yourself as outside of it. Once you see yourself inside, what is your platform? Who do you need to work with? In what spaces can you enact change? If there is someone leading efforts that you can let know you are available? Have you thought about who might have been harmed by your previous silence and how you can repair that relationship?

### **If you think getting cancelled is scary, just wait till you take actual risks in speaking up to people with power.**

Cancel culture diverts our attention away from those who are the true barriers to social change. Real impediments to change are people invested in keeping things as they are and not allowing voices to be heard, blocking dialogue that needs to happen, and not investing in hiring and promoting marginalized people or incorporating multiple perspectives into what our society should look like. When you start taking risks to speak up against those folks, that's when you can suffer true consequences like not getting a job or not being promoted because someone with power does not like what you had to say or who you are aligned with. The focus on cancel culture as the enemy of change is a distraction. People from dominant groups can see cancel culture as a tightrope, but it's people from marginalized groups that are really walking one by having to conform to dominant society and be constantly conscious of the way they are being perceived.

### **You must put in the time**

All of this learning takes time, and it is not just reading an article here and there. When you are part of dominant groups, you have to watch, read, and listen to as many perspectives as you can. You have to put in time to gain deeper knowledge. You have to build up some stamina and commitment to keep going in the face of obstacles. Don't underestimate how difficult continually working on equity and justice issues can be. It takes an emotional toll that marginalized people live with every day.

### **So, I leave you with this—the big picture:**

"Dominant culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community."—bell hooks

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Mary Frances Winters, *We Can't Talk About That At Work : How to Talk about Race, Religion, Politics, and Other Polarizing Topics* (2017).

<sup>2</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003).