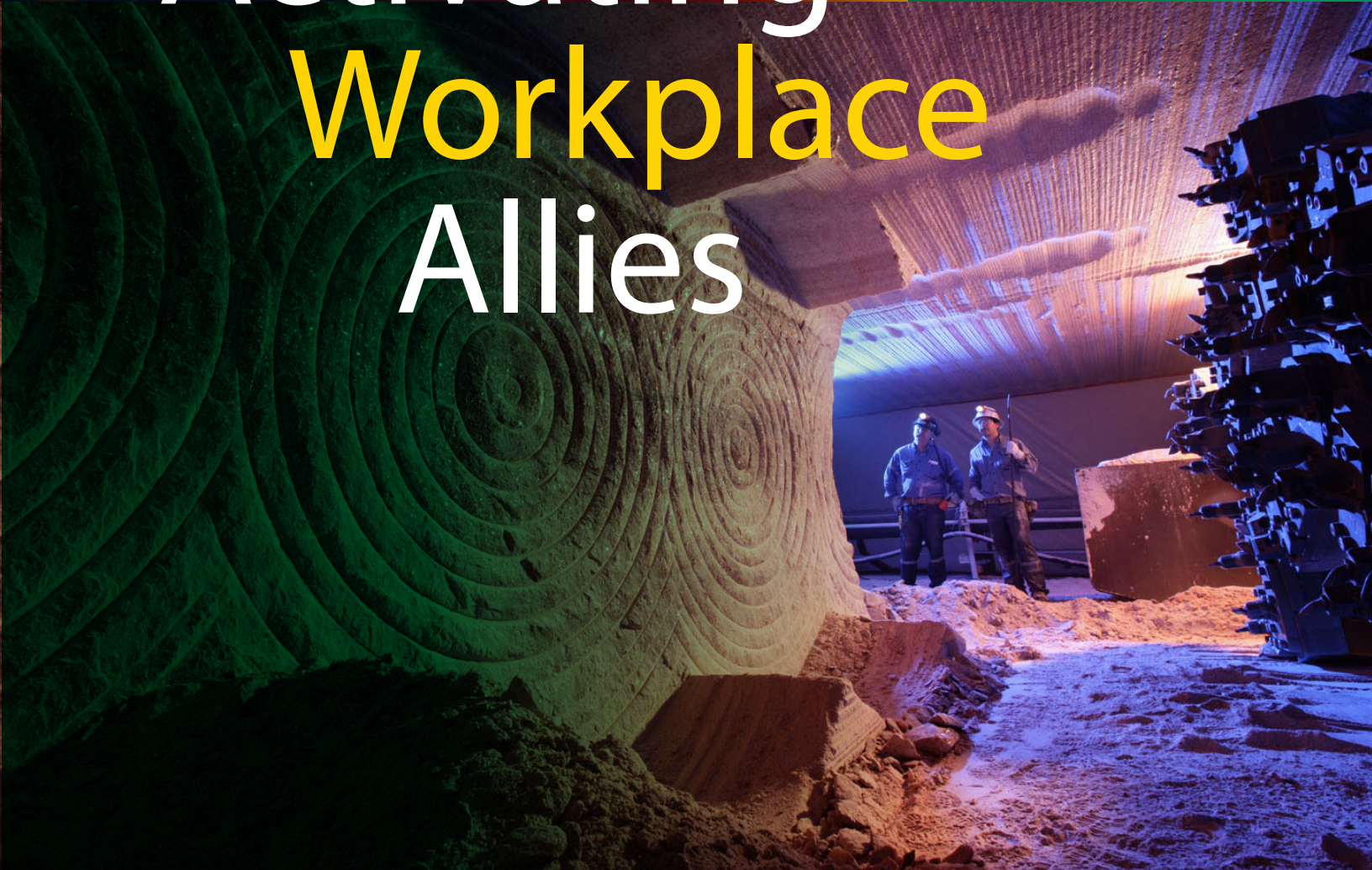




Activating Workplace Allies



Foreword from IMII



Extractive industries, including the mining and minerals industries, are facing labour shortages. Notwithstanding the sector's increased embrace of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), underperformance with recruiting and retaining diversity groups—including women, immigrants and Indigenous peoples—has been identified as one of the factors influencing the labour market gap in Saskatchewan (Mining Industry Human Resource Council & Saskatchewan Mining Association, 2024).

For IMII, this gap is concerning as innovative ways of working and new skills are becoming increasingly important to the sector's future. Without skilled people, the industry will be challenged to achieve its sustainability, digital transformation and productivity goals.

In 2020 IMII, with direction from its minerals member companies, issued a call for research into potential root causes of the industry's underperforming with diversity groups and for development of potential solutions. Jocelyn Peltier-Huntley answered the call, and her research identified allyship—a practice of inclusion—as part of the solution to achieve a shift in workplace culture for traditionally male-dominated and non-diverse sectors such as mining and minerals. A better workplace culture is a necessary building block for attracting, recruiting and retaining more diverse people in our industry and removing barriers to them having rewarding career opportunities.

In this thought leadership piece, Jocelyn invites readers to learn about allyship and consider the impact that active allyship can have on themselves, their co-workers and on the sector. We all want to be valued for our talent and contributions at work, and a diversity of talent is, in IMII's view, a value driver for our industry.

Read on and consider answering the call to action to become an active ally.

Al Shpyth
Executive Director, IMII



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Introduction

I spent the first thirteen years of my career working as a professional mechanical engineer in the Canadian mining industry. I was often the only woman in the room, the only woman in the engineering department, and one of a few women on the industrial sites where I worked and visited. When I moved into a leadership role, I was one of a few who did not have a stay-at-home spouse to care for my two children. In 2017, I returned to the University of Saskatchewan as an interdisciplinary master's student to study the gender gap in the Canadian mining sector. My Masters' research explored the perceptions and experiences of people in the Canadian mining sector and discovered a high occurrence of unreported discrimination and harassment incidents that primarily impact women (Peltier-Huntley, 2019, 2022).

In 2020, International Minerals Innovation Institute issued a call for research proposals to support the advancement of equity, diversity, and inclusion within the Saskatchewan's minerals sector. I saw an opportunity to work with Saskatchewan mining sector to develop practical solutions to the problems I had uncovered during my Master's research and submitted a proposal for research. The resulting study, now called the Activating Allies study, was completed as part of my Ph.D. in 2024.






The Problem

Today, Canadian industries such as mining and Canadian professions such as engineering still do not have proportional representation, which would align with the 50% of the Canadian population who are women. Instead, there remains an over-representation of men and under-representation of women. Men comprise approximately 85% of the workforce in both engineering and mining, and women's representation is approximately 15% (Engineers Canada, 2023; Mining Industry Human Resource Council, 2023).

In addition to the under-representation of women, many other equity-deserving groups are under-represented in traditionally male-dominated workplaces like the minerals sector. Equity-deserving groups in Canada include, women, Indigenous people, racialized persons, persons with disabilities, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people. For example, Indigenous people in Canada comprise 12% of the mining industry and 1% of the engineering profession (Engineers Canada, 2019; Mining Industry Human Resource Council, 2023).

Many studies have shown that under-represented and equity-deserving groups experience less psychological safety and belonging—a lack of inclusion—and face barriers due to inequitable and biased systems, which leads to higher turnover rates and a loss of diversity. In particular, studies in the mining sector have found that being under-represented, such as those who identify with one or more equity-deserving group can negatively impact one's sense of belonging, psychological safety, and, at times, physical safety (Carter et al., 2024; Elizabeth Broderick & Co, 2023; National Inquiry of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019; Peltier-Huntley, 2022; Rio Tinto & Elizabeth Broderick & Co., 2022).

As an EDI practitioner—someone who leads EDI change efforts—I work with leaders and organizations to identify proactive and systemic strategies to shift workplace culture. In my Ph.D. dissertation, I argued that to achieve a shift in workplace culture, we need individuals to act as workplace allies who practice inclusion—and leaders—potential allies with additional role privilege—to recognize inequities and remove systemic barriers in line with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.





The Activating Allies research project

The multi-year Activating Allies research study, sought to answer the question: how can we engage, train, and support everyone to act as “active allies”? The objectives of the Activating Allies study included learning from workplace allies about their allyship practice, about how workplace allies are activated to develop a practice of inclusion and then testing interventions that support the development of active workplace allyship.

I define workplace allyship as a practice of inclusion where—through listening, learning, and reflection on personal experiences, and privileges—people actively support historically marginalized persons and communities in achieving their full potential. In this study, I broadly applied the concept of allyship to encourage inclusion towards women, Indigenous peoples, visible minorities, persons with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, and other under-represented or marginalized groups in the context of Canadian society.

Methodology

Following a literature review (Phase 1), we received University of Saskatchewan research ethics approval and to conduct three data collection phases. Due to the funding from IMII and Mitacs, I was able to hire other graduate students to help me in the data collection phases. In Phase 2, Jovita Dias and I interviewed 17 active allies and developed the Ally Activation change model (Peltier-Huntley & Dias, 2023). We thematically analyzed the qualitative data from these 17, hour-long discussions to gain a deeper understanding of allyship in practice and the path to activating allies.





Figure 1: Ally Activation Model (Peltier-Huntley & Dias, 2023)

Ally Activation Model

We learned from the 17 participants that people often start off in a state of unawareness before witnessing or experiencing a form of inequity, which propels a potential ally into a state of awareness, shown in Figure 1. During this awareness stage people understand that words and actions lead can occur as harmful microaggressions, discrimination, harassment, and bullying. Furthermore, the root cause—even when unintentional—is often due to aspects of our identity, such as our gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, abilities, etc.

After becoming aware, participants described a support seeking phase where they sought resolution to the inequities they had faced or become aware of. If people were not able to achieve support at this stage, there is a high risk they will leave their workplace, profession, or industry as they seek an environment where they feel psychologically safe and belong. This effect is also called the “leaky pipeline”. However, if during the support seeking phase people felt heard, validated and supported to remain in the environment or due to their network, they will carry onto the realizing phase.

Participants described the realizing phases as a series of “light-bulb” moments where they expanded their understanding of the experiences of others, history, and their own self-identity. Lastly, participants described feeling humbly ready to begin leading change and take action as an active ally.

People may go through the Ally Activation model many times based on different aspects of identity. As a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, able-bodied woman, I first went through the model based on my experiences with being the only woman in the room and my understanding of gender. Then I became curious about aspects of identity such as race, sexual orientation, and disability and have cycled through the Ally Activation model many times since.

Active Allies Course

In the third phase of the research project, Dr. Rosa Moazed and I used the Ally Activation model to develop the Active Allies course. The Active Allies course supported participants to enhance their understanding around workplace challenges faced by various equity-deserving groups, develop critical allyship skills, and put them into practice. The format of the 4-week course involved approximately 0.5 hours of weekly online learning and a 1-hour weekly group discussion.

In Phase 3, I tested the Active Allies course with 26 participants at the engineering college, and in Phase 4, Dr. Moazed and I tested the course with 76 participants in the Canadian mining industry. Before and after the course, we had participants complete a survey to gauge their self-reported understanding, motivations, and behaviours. During the course we also collected data from quizzes, assignments, group discussions, and emails.

Results

A summary of demographic information on the participants from the three data collection phases of the study is shown in Figure 2. Of the 119 participants from Phase 2 through Phase 4, 63 (53%) identified as women, 55 (46%) identified as men, and 1 (0.8%) identified as non-binary; 19 (16%) identified as Indigenous, 30 (25%) as racialized, and 70 (59%) as white; 10 (8%) identified as having a disability or being disabled and 11 (9%) identified as belonging to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. In total, 25 (21%) participants indicated having no aspects of marginalized identity.

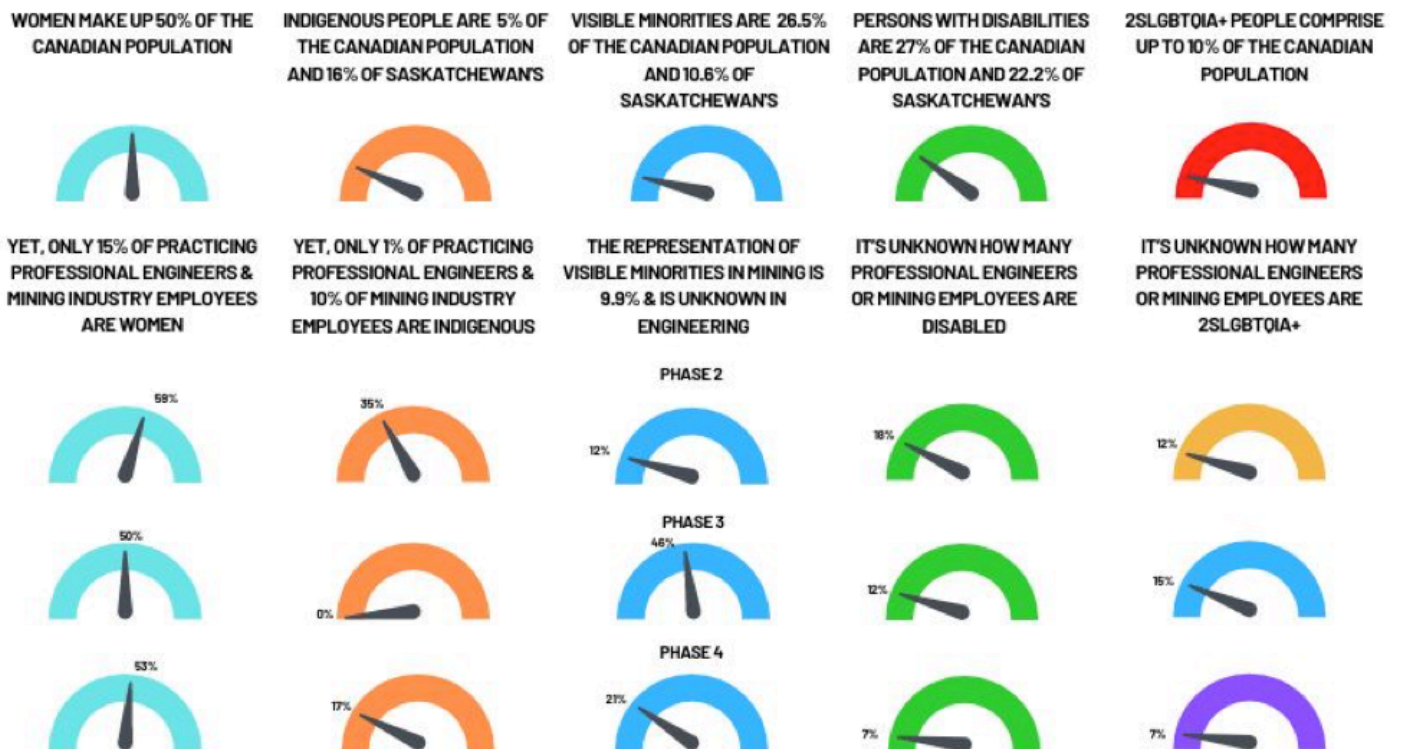


Figure 2: Demographics of Research Participants Compared to Relevant Population, Industry, and Professional Representation (Peltier-Huntley, 2024)



Allyship Implications for Saskatchewan's Minerals Sector

While the full details of the Activating Allies project are published in my dissertation, available here on the University of Saskatchewan's repository and the results from the mining industry trial will be published in an upcoming CIM Journal article, I will share a few key points that we learned from the study that are relevant to the Saskatchewan's minerals sector and other Canadian workplaces.

1) People are motivated to contribute to inclusive workplaces

Many participants entered the Activating Allies study with a relatively high motivation to support and learn about the history of Indigenous people. The collective understanding of the historical and ongoing marginalization of Indigenous peoples has grown in Canada over the past decade due in part to the transformational work led by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In 2020, the horrific impact was further made real to many Canadians as unmarked graves near began to be discovered near former residential schools across the country. Understanding the Truth of Canadian history which has resulted in differential outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians—due to policies related to education, health care, corrections, and access to clean drinking water—and the close proximity of the minerals sector to Indigenous communities, has motivated employees in the minerals sector to want to know more and do better.

Another key theme motivating employees to want to do better was due to the ambitions, statements, and strategies that many minerals' companies have made to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion. Company's commitments help establish that workplaces are a safe place for EDI conversations, which can in turn, motivate potential allies to seek out ways to become active allies.

2) Allyship skill development is needed to support behavioural and culture change

The data we collected prior to and following the Active Allies course indicate that participants had a lower understanding of EDI related terminology—such as diversity, inclusion, equity, intersectionality, human rights, psychological safety, allyship, etc.—prior to the course (see Figure 3) and were engaging in EDI related conversations, an average of once per month.

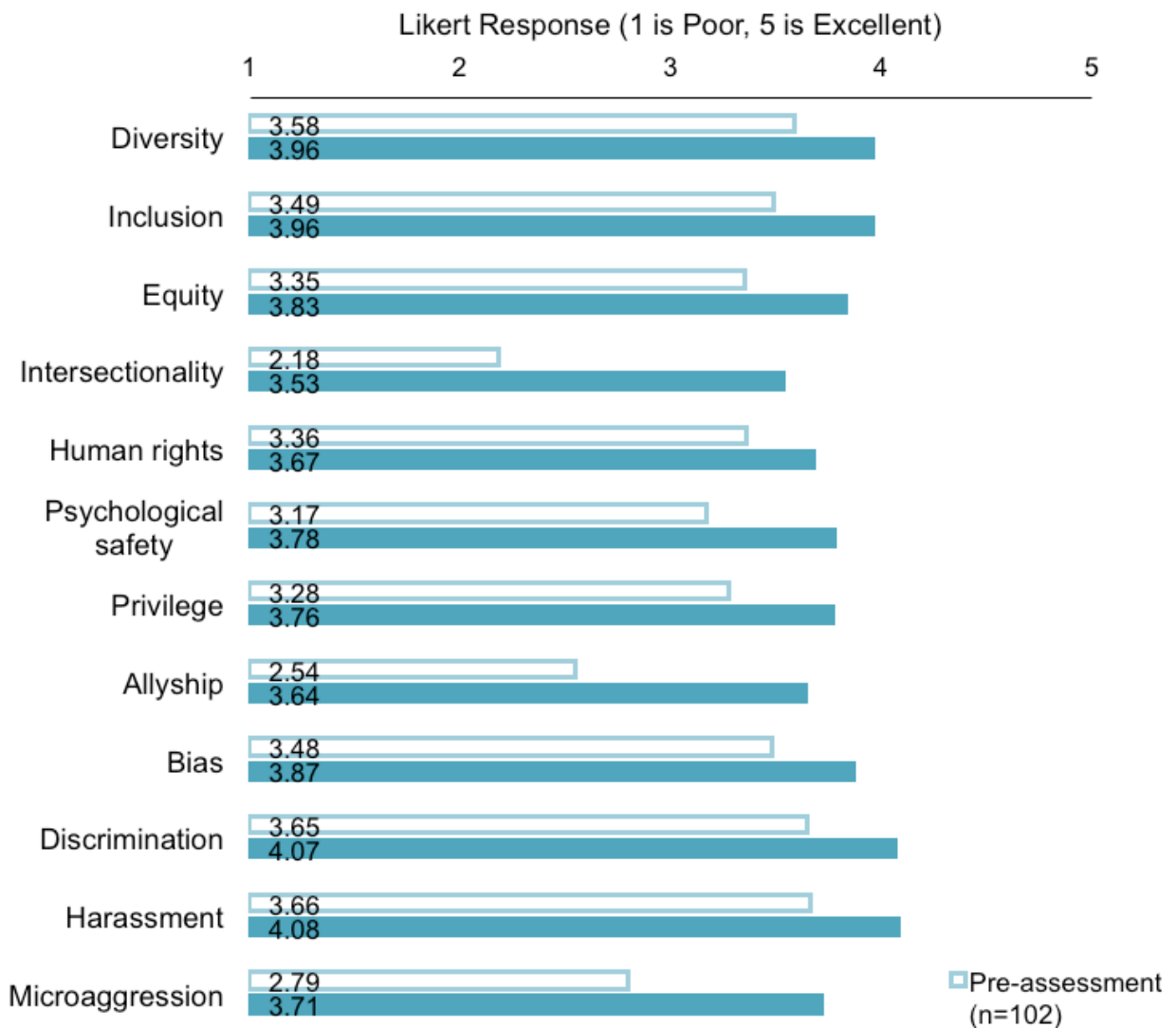


Figure 3: Participants' ranking of their understanding various allyship terms before and after taking the Active Allies course

As is shown in Figure 3, following the training, participants had a better understanding of terminology. We believe this context led to a greater confidence discussing aspects of their identity, and as a result, more people were engaging in EDI related conversations an average of once per week (greater competence).

3) Learners need safe places to advance their allyship skills

A key learning from our study, was that all people need psychologically safe places to develop, explore, and grow their inclusive practices. A Phase 2 participant, shared with us that while it might be more obviously important to establish safe supports for those from equity-deserving groups to grow and learn, it is also important to create safe places for allies. As such through the Active Allies course, we designed the material in such a way that participants could learn from course material and through relevant scenarios without needing to share their own personal experiences.

Participants were further supported through mutually agreed to ground rules established at their first discussion session. They then grew their understanding and confidence due to the common context gained through the online course materials which they reviewed prior to each discussion session. Lastly, their discussion groups allowed them a small group of peers to test skills and grow their understanding with EDI related topics. While many participants were nervous about the group discussions at the start of the course, these 1-hour weekly group discussion sessions were overwhelmingly cited as a highlight of participants' experiences. A repeating pattern across nearly all discussion groups, was that their group was successful because of the people in their group.

4) Leaders have an important role to play

Following the completion of the course, participants shared examples of leaders who had taken the course bringing EDI related topics up at regular business meetings. Not only did individual participant's behaviours start to shift but there were early indications of culture shifts due to leaders' behaviours changes.

As the minerals sector seeks to attract and retain a diverse and representative workforce, organizations may be unknowingly bringing in people who have faced instances of workplace or personal trauma. We believe that policies and practices will need to evolve to support these individuals who have faced trauma so that they can achieve their full potential. Likewise, leaders, will need to become informed to best support all people to achieve their full potential. This does not mean that leaders will need to become experts on all forms of trauma, but they require a level of awareness to notice when someone may be feeling unsafe, and to direct them to appropriate support systems.



Conclusion



The Activating Allies study was a collaborative effort between industry and researchers which resulted in the development of the Ally Activation model and the Active Allies course. These are two practical outcomes which can help aspiring change leaders with understanding how to advance EDI within organizations and provide evidence on how to develop allyship competencies within individuals. Our findings from the course have implications on how to motivate, train, and support individuals with advancing on their allyship journeys as well as the important role that leaders play in modeling and reinforcing inclusive behaviours and practices.

To learn more about current offering of the Active Allies course now being facilitated by Jocelyn's company Prairie Catalyst, please click visit: <https://www.prairiecatalyst.ca/active-allies-course>.

Acknowledgements

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