

#RealTalk: Cultural Competence 2.0 - Allyship Beyond the Basics

Below are the answers to questions not answered during the panel.

Video Replay of Panel: <https://youtu.be/Ja2-lBqtpmq>

Emcee

John Chen, CSP (Certified Speaking Professional), CEO Engaging Virtual Meetings, 18 years MPI Member

<https://linkedin.com/in/cejohnchen>

Panelists

Khris Baizen, Senior Director of Global Production Sales, Representing API Event Professionals, first generation Americans, the MPI Global EDI Committee, and accessibility (Hearing Impaired)

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/experientialdesign/>

Cameron Curtis, CMM, CAE, Chief Innovator, C2 Association Strategies and CEO, LGBT Meeting Professionals Association, Representing women and the LGBTQIA2+ community

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/cunzcurtis/>

Marques Davison, Executive Director, Davison Conferences & Development, Representing small business owners, male minorities in event planning, and the neurodiverse community

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/marquesdavison/>

Sandra Serrant, CMP, PMP, MS, Events Manager / Adjunct Professor, Representing Black meeting professionals. MPIGNY DEI

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/sserrant/>

Ask Us Anything - <https://forms.gle/hpcP5VKa9SSu6UyA7>

Demonstrate - Introduce myself

CEO, Engaging Virtual Meetings

57 Chinese American Male

Grandson of a Paper Son, one of the ways my grandfather immigrated despite

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882

18 year MPI member

Served in almost every VP and Director role for Washington State Chapter

Moderator for the Asian American Pacific Islander Community
8 years Co-chair of the Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander Heritage Celebration in Seattle
Founder of APIEventProfs for Asian Pacific Islanders and the AAPI Joint Caucus Keynotes collaborating with MPI, NACE and NSA.
Founder of Asian Pacific Islanders+ National Speakers Association which took 50 years to happen
2 time Wiley author and my 28th year of owning my own business!

Panelists

(Reverse alphabetical order)

sahn dra Sandra Serrant, Event Manager / Adjunct Professor

She's the Event Manager and Adjunct Professor for the City University of New York

- She's a 26 year member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, the FIRST sorority established by African-American College Women
- Is owner of her new company called, Day Of Event Pros, LLC
- She was part of the first North American cohort of professionals to achieve the Masters Degree in Meetings & Events Management
- She's representing the Black Meeting Professionals Community
- Let's welcome Sandra Serrant! (walk on music - New York by Alicia Keys & Jay-Z, chorus "Baby, I'm from New York. Concrete jungle where dreams are made of There's nothin' you can't do. Now you're in New York. These streets will make you feel brand new. Big lights will inspire you. Hear it for New York, New York, New York
- 60 seconds to add on to intro

Mar khes Marques Davison, Executive Director, Davison Conferences & Development

- He's in his 5th year with Meeting Professionals International specializing in coordination and AV
- He's an internationally ranked slam poet and frontman to the anthem rock band Blaquelisted
- He's representing small business owners, male minorities and the **neurospicy** community
- Let's welcome (mar-cus dav-eh-son) Marques Davison (walk on music)
- 60 seconds to add on to intro

Khris bay zen Baizen, Senior Director of Global Production Sales

- He's the 2025 Chair of the MPI EDI Global Advisory Committee
- He's a dog dad to his mini labradoodle, Bobby and he's representing the Asian Pacific Islander event professionals, first generation Americans and hearing impaired persons
- In addition to his multiple volunteer roles advocating for underrepresented communities in Los Angeles, He's also a senior director of production at Encore, the Asian Pacific Islander Business Resource Group Lead AND on the enABLE Leadership Team

- Let's welcome Khris Baizen! (walk on music, Awich, Jay Park, KR\$NA, Masiwei & VannDa - ASIAN STATE OF MIND (Prod. Diego Av)
- 60 seconds to add on to intro

Cameron Curtis, CMM, CAE, CEO, LGBT Meeting Professionals Association

- She's the CEO of the LGBT Meeting Professionals Association and Founder & Chief Innovator of C2 Association Strategies
- She lives by her grandmother's mantra, "Never turn down anything but your coat collar!"
- She's representing women and the LGBTQIA2+ Community
- Let's welcome Cameron Curtis (walk on music)
- 60 seconds to add on to intro

Audience Questions:

Q: What's does allyship mean to you?

John: Allyship - It's not about you using the mic for others - it's about passing the mic. Allyship to me is using whatever privilege you have to help others. I personally am an ally to women, Black, Latinx, LGBTQ2+, neurodiversity and many others. The more I have personally have done allyship work especially with Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander, the more I'm convinced that we need allies because often we can't see it ourselves.

Baizen: Allyship means using whatever platform we have to hand someone else the mic—and then standing next to them to protect their voice when it shakes. Doesn't have to be big to be meaningful. Sometimes allyship is a quiet check-in, a repost, a behind-the-scenes "I've got your back." The small moments matter—they build trust. [Allyship doesn't have to] always be visible or loud. Some of the strongest forms of allyship happen quietly—like stepping in to advocate for someone when they're not in the room or offering feedback to a peer about a harmful behavior. It's not about grandstanding. It's about consistency

Marques: Allyship in our house is stepping up when no one is looking. We believe in standing up for others even if we don't believe in what they do because everyone has a right to their own beliefs and views and to be respected for their opinions and beliefs. A true ally is a person who stands up for them when they are not in the room.

Cameron: A true ally doesn't sit quietly on the sidelines in comfort or neutrality. An ally takes risks, disrupts the status quo, and steps into hard conversations, not for credit, but because it's the right thing to do. Real allyship demands more than kindness or good intentions; it requires action, accountability, and the courage to confront injustice head-on, even when it costs you something. In the global events industry, that means advocating for inclusive spaces across race, ethnicity, gender identity, neurodiversity, ability, and more.

Q: "For a person who wants to support other diversity groups, is it actually welcome and productive to join a group/community? I.e. I'm a white Caucasian woman. Should I actually join a local black, LGBTQ+, other organization? Or what is the best way to support? "

John: YES! The #1 way to support is to join a group and make a friend. Don't take over, take time to assess. Ask first and even wait to be asked, meanwhile show up, be supportive and learn. Book suggestion:

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/52189878-the-anatomy-of-organized-hate>, Lonnie Lusardo documents 10 people who rescinded hate groups.

Baizen: Yes—and not just to *join*, but to *serve with curiosity*. Ask what's needed before assuming what's helpful. Speak to the community leader first to ensure your presence preserves psychological safety for the current membership. True allyship means bringing your hands, not just your opinions. If you're willing to do the work, to be silent when needed, and to amplify when asked—your presence can be powerful.

Marques: YES, Yes, Yes again. Not only is it appropriate it is necessary to move the needle towards belonging for every community. The most powerful voice in a room can come from your peers. The experience and lessons I learn from being in a room as the only person of color, but comfortable and welcomed, when I am in a room of people that all look like me, and I share the information with that group, it creates a space for them to accept new information and sometimes adverse opinions in a safe space. Let's go as far as to say you join a black LGBTQIA+ organization, and the acceptance, knowledge, and lessons you may learn when you go to a family reunion, high school reunion, or a neighborhood book club. There may be more people in the room who identify and/or look like you, but those people have not had your experience. If a stereotype of the group came up casually, you may have the knowledge to explain the misconception in the stereotype, and it's far more likely to be accepted by you than it would a loud black male like me. And as your ally, I would be front a center to support you should there be any pushback.

Cameron: Yes. For example, the [LGBT Meeting Professionals Association](#) welcomes allies as members and we encourage engagement. If you are going to join an organization as an ally, it's important to listen to understand so you can best support the needs of each group.

Q: What is your #1 tip for people wanting to be a better ally?

John: Do something. Join a group. Make a friend. Use something in your privilege to provide an opportunity such as a speaking opportunity, a job lead, a referral. Nominate someone for an award. Greet someone who is NEW at an event. Design a feature in an event to celebrate an overlooked group.

Baizen: Start by listening with the intent to transform—not to respond. Allyship begins in the pause between hearing someone's pain and reacting to it. Sit with the discomfort. Let it change how you move. Early on in my career, I interrupted someone to "add perspective" during a panel

about Breast Cancer Awareness Month and its effects on marginalized communities. I was trying to help. I ended up centering myself. I followed up with an apology and committed to doing what I now call “interruption audits” on myself.

Marques: Do to others what you want done to you. Think about what an ally to you looks like, and be the best version of that you can be to your peers.

Cameron: Start by looking inward. Take time to audit your own personal and professional spaces and ask yourself who’s missing and whose voices aren’t being heard, then commit to actively changing that. You don’t have to wait for a big initiative. Reach out to a peer from a marginalized community and ask how you can support, not performatively, but with sincerity and follow-through. Advocate for their inclusion in rooms where decisions get made. Small, intentional actions like these ripple out, and in an industry built on connection, that ripple matters.

Q: What is some advice for young meeting professionals that are about to enter the industry?

John: Take the time to self-reflect. Decide what your top values are. Write them down. Then refer to them when you make meeting and work decisions. Continue learning. Learn when you make a mistake. Celebrate when you make a difference.

Baizen: Lead with an open heart and curiosity driven mind. You don’t have to know it all. Because you’ll find mentors as you navigate this stage of your journey. You just have to care enough to ask better questions. The rooms you’re meant to be in will expand with your growth.

Marques: Be your authentic self. I was once told the meetings and events industry is like music from a guitar. Every note has been played. There are always new ways to play the sounds but the strings still play the same notes. When you mimic others in the industry you may have success just as a musician that plays covers. Success comes in many ways but your authentic self today wants success too. Remember what that means to you in 10 years. Write it down and check in.

Cameron: Relationships are the key to success and those relationships are built by being open to new people, new ideas, and engaging in our industry organizations.

Q: What barriers to diversity and inclusion have you encountered? If any, how did you overcome them?

John: While the easy ones are organizations and systems that don’t make inclusion choices, the more challenging one for Asian Pacific Islanders is ourselves. Despite being made up of 50 different cultures and the opportunity to be the LARGEST affinity group, I have found that APIs don’t naturally want to join. Imagine all the multitudes of reasons for that...and I overcome that challenge by continually looking for new ways and reasons to get people engaged. I’m excited this year we had more API speakers than ever at WEC and we all networked and supported

each other. #Progress.

Baizen: One barrier I faced was being “the only.” The only API man in a higher level strategy conversation. The only neurodivergent voice. The only one speaking about faith. I overcame it by refusing to water myself down. The more I led with truth, the more others showed up and said, *Me too*.

I once got feedback that I made a leadership meeting “uncomfortable” because I brought up ethnicity during a hiring conversation. I spent weeks questioning if I went too far—until one of the new hires told me that moment led to them getting a chance. Not everyone claps when you speak truth—but someone always benefits.

Marques: I face them daily as a male minority within the events industry, As a black business owner. The biggest barrier has always been inclusivity for me. To be in the “room where it happens” (Shout out to my Hamilton Fans) often takes big dollars and/or Exclusive Status. I do not have a major corporate backing in my industry and in my personal experience I have been an hourly employee my whole life until 2023. These are the same barriers to inclusivity as 1000s of my peers. To me overcoming them is not my goal. To me I believe by bringing awareness I am eliminating those barriers for others that come after me.

Q: How can we measure allyship in order to track and improve upon it?

John: I start with the things I can measure. %age of API speakers, # of members for APIEventProfs, %age of API attendees. Then it’s about the things you can’t measure. How much does someone feel like they belong? Do they feel engaged? Do they feel included? And the last category is that there are things we want to measure but there are NO NUMBERS. Like %age of API executives in the meetings industry. We looked high and low and there are no current numbers. So one of our projects is to fund and execute research for this so we can measure and see if we are having an effect. Did you know that APIs have 200% the national average for advanced degrees but have 50% or less fo executives jobs?

Join APIEventProfs

<http://fb.com/groups/apieventprofs>

<https://www.linkedin.com/groups/14029754/>

Baizen: At one point, I used LinkedIn engagement as a proxy for impact. Then someone asked, “What changed because of your post?” I had no answer. That’s when I learned: don’t just count the clicks—count the care.

Through the tools uncovered by John Chen, We started tracking anonymous feedback on who felt seen after every event. Patterns emerged and so did a truth: when inclusion is real, *everyone* scores higher. Even the ones who once resisted it.

Q: What's an example of active allyship that you've seen in the past year? How about passive allyship? How do we encourage more active allyship?

John: For active allyship, I want to share Joan Eisenstodt. An industry veteran who has spoken loudly for API support in the events industry, she has given tirelessly with her time and got 3 of us nominated for PCMA awards which we were all selected as finalists and one won. That's active allyship. For passive allyship, Khris Baizen is a master. He recommended over 10 speakers for my API Speaker Showcase, he brought me in to MPI WEC 2025 and chose to have me as the moderator, he arrives and has presence in the audience for every API speaker this year. These are great examples of passive allyship that people with privilege can model.

Q: Over the past 3 years I've put focus on really infusing DEI into my largest city-wide conference for educators. I've found that our BIPOC attendees are having a much better experience and are feeling the inclusivity and sense of belonging while non-BIPOC attendees survey ratings are decreasing. I even get comments to stop infusing DEI into the conference. How do you balance and keep all attendees happy?

John: I'd love to see how you infuse DEI into your city-wide. Remember your non-BIPOC are members of all sorts of groups too. My suggestion would be to interview those who commented to "stop infusing DEI" or the unhappy 5% and find out what they really want. I think you might find the balance somewhere in there. My thought is to remember that when you turn off your non-BIPOC attendees, you might be accidentally turning off allies.

Marques: So don't infuse DEI...to them. What I mean is maybe there is truth to the statement, and there is an opportunity to focus on those who have DEI burnout and educate on what that looks like. I have faced moments where I might not want to be in the front of the room of an important DEI session and just want to talk about sports and get an emotional break for self-care. I wouldn't take the statement as they don't want DEI, but maybe there isn't space for them where they feel belonging. Or it's a challenge to educate those on self-care when you are dealing in such a passionate space.

Q: We recently did a diversity panel specifically about indigenous people in Canada. My org serves a global audience and the feedback we got after the panel was that the "diversity" that was addressed in the panel was not "broad enough." how do you position local or regional-specific diversity topics to be applicable to a larger group?

John: I might suggest adding to the description and to the opening of the program the goals of this program. I might also suggest highlighting a different panel that addresses diversity in a more broad category if you have one. I think by acknowledging the elephant in the room in the beginning and restating the goals, attendees will be more positive if they know the scope of the program AND how they can get their needs met somewhere else in the conference. As you notice this year's MPI WEC panel, it was intentional from Jessie that she knew she has larger states so she chose to include as many aspects of diversity she could in this panel so it would meet the needs and the response from the panel was positive (see reviews).

Q: How do you incorporate EDI into your work environment when company messaging takes a turn to eliminating EDI efforts?

John: A recent strategy is to change the name. Instead of calling it EDI, call it “Company Culture” and continue to back the strategy with facts like companies that help people find a best friend at work are 7x more likely to stay and that up to 80% of your workforce say they are disengaged.

Baizen: You make the work undeniable to multiple departments in the org. Tie it to retention (get buy in from Talent Acquisition). To customer loyalty (buy in from marketing and business dev). To innovation. Inclusion is not a side project—it’s a survival strategy. And once people see the fruit, they’ll want to protect the roots.

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I had a senior leader once tell me to “scale back the messaging.” Instead, I brought them anonymous employee feedback from our neurodivergent community. Reading those stories out loud changed the tone of the room. Sometimes storytelling does what statistics can’t.

Q: A lot of what is being said sounds similar to what my group is experiencing with the current administration and government funding. Navigating allyship and our organizational mission with “risk management” in order to continue the work that we support without risking losing the work altogether.

John: Agree. It’s a time of change and the best leaders navigate that change while finding ways to continue with what works through flexibility and repositioning.

Q: Follow up, have you ever regretted or did not appreciate someone being an ally for you in a certain moment??

John: Good question! I think the only time I didn’t appreciate someone being an ally to me was that they later blindsided me and the allyship was used to gain false trust. For instance, I once had a Korean group that I found a grant for and then later they didn’t pay my invoice.

Q: Sandra - Would you say those adverse effects of Allyship happened because you were the underrepresented person being the ally? If situations were reversed where you were not being heard and that person was your ally what do you think would have happened?

Q: To all but notably Khri - Knowing your Christian missionary background, what advice do you have for people wanting to be allies but knowing that those immediately around you might not agree with your "new" beliefs.

Baizen:

[I have the sacred privilege of walking with both faith and radical advocacy in my bones. A love-first, ask questions later type of Christianity and the culture that welcomed me. The stage](#)

and the back row. I'm a Christian who believes the Gospel is for *everybody*, and I'm an industry thought leader who fights for belonging like my life depends on it—because sometimes it did.

People ask me all the time how I reconcile the two. How I can follow Jesus and still show up so loudly, so visibly, for the ones the Church has often kept at arm's length.

Here's what I tell em:

You don't have to stop following Jesus to love people fully. You just have to stop confusing tradition (binary thinking) with truth.

Because the Jesus I know didn't guard the gate—He held it open.

He sat with the ones others crossed the street to avoid.

He never asked anyone to perform perfection before calling them family

I follow that Jesus.

So yes, I'll fight for accessibility in events. I'll fight for representation on leadership teams. I'll show up for the LGBTQ+ community, for Black and brown voices, for the neurodivergent, the immigrant, the single parent, the recovering addict, the person still figuring it out.

Because if I say I love God, I don't get to pick and choose who I show up for.

Because in every boardroom I enter, every panel I speak on, every young professional who asks if they're too queer, too brown, too neurodivergent, too complicated to lead—I remember the words I wish someone had said to me sooner:

“You are not too much. You are not too late. You are not too lost. And you are not alone.”

Faith is not the absence of questions. It's the audacity to love in their presence.

Jesus never once asked for a résumé of worthiness. He just said, *Follow me*.

So I do. One act of love at a time.

John: If something will hinder your ability to be an ally, you might choose to not disclose that immediately and find ways to build relationship and share that fact when you think you have achieved a safe environment or an ally you trust enough to share with.

Marques. Great Question, and I have a unique experience of being raised in catholic school until 6th grade, coming from an indigenous family culture, and then I later lived in my aunt's home as a devout Jehovah's Witness, to moving out to a Buddhist Grandmother (Thank god she taught me how to meditate/chant). Everything I knew as a catholic kid between 7th grade

and College was a crash course in acceptance. I was accepted into the arms of the holy spirit while honoring Mother Earth and the gods, as I was taught by my great-grandmother. I now see that as an opportunity to teach acceptance in the “native tongue,” so to speak. I'm not using ChatGPT, so I don't have the vocabulary at the moment, but I was taught to speak to people where they are at, but also only speak on what you know. So when I know something may be radical in view, I know that regardless of the person's god next to me, my god, and the spirits that guide me, accept all. And I just trust that my judgment is only based on my actions and mine alone. And that's why I am the ally I believe, sometimes hope is an honorable one.

Q: How would you deal with someone on your team who was not interested in being an ally?

John: For me personally, I don't mind non-allies as I believe anyone has a choice. I think I have a bigger challenge with someone who choose specifically to be anti-ally and destroys other work and/or creates a non-safe environment. That's when I stand up as a leader to protect that person and the group culture. For instance, one of my female association members said a male member made a comment that made her feel uncomfortable. As a leader, I choose to investigate it and ask the male member what he said and eventually facilitated a meeting between the two of them which helped both of them to make their own decisions on how to resolve the situation. Both reported it was beneficial to each other and more importantly, I demonstrated that I care and I will take action to give credibility to our culture.

Marques- Use them. I use them as an example every chance I get. And let them know about it. I use sentences like “ this is what a non-ally looks like” so they know I accept their position, it will just be a very uncomfortable position in my workspace. It's not a position for the faint of heart, but it's all I got. Usually my company supported me, so that's something to check with leadership on haha.

Q: How do you continue to advocate for DEI and allyship in an organization that does not prioritize those efforts?

John: You can get an organization to agree to certain goals. If you can show DEI, allyship or other named actions to achieve those goals, most organizations won't care about how you got there, they will care that you achieved the goals. For instance I set a goal for 43% growth, my entire board agreed and I didn't have to mention how we met that goal. I know and those who care know that many of the new members come from amazing backgrounds. In addition, our chapter has 40% API board leadership. Many of those board members said they agreed to join the board because I was the leader. #LeadershipMatters

Cameron: Cameron: We all have influence, whether it's a big platform or a single seat at the table. Ask harder questions. Challenge biased norms. Make space for voices that are too often overlooked. Speak up when you see discrimination. Don't wait for the perfect words, start with honest ones. Allyship is about committing to the work, even when it's messy, and continuing to learn, even when you think you've got it right.



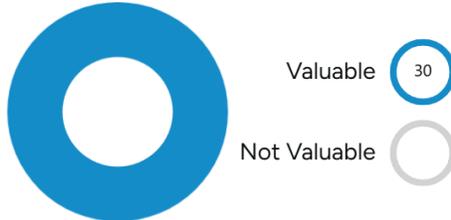
John Chen, CSP

Audience Feedback On Jun 18, 2025

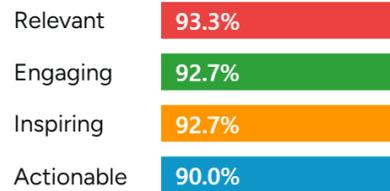
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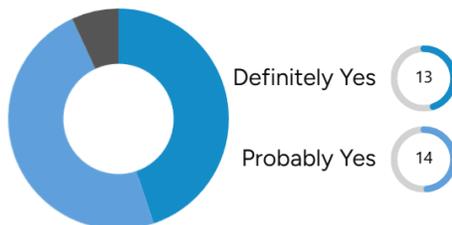
100% found this session valuable



Attendees found this session



93% want to hear this speaker again



30 responses





John Chen, CSP

Audience Feedback On Jun 18, 2025

Meeting Professionals International

#RealTalk: Cultural Competence 2.0 - Allyship Beyond the Basi...

“ Allyship is a new term/concept that needs more promotion and understanding. This was an enlightening conversation on a sometimes decisive topic in corporate culture. ”

“ I found this really helpful to have #realtalk. Great hearing from real people of real diversity and their thoughts. ”

★ “ Allyship is a new term/concept that needs more promotion and understanding. This was an enlightening conversation on a sometimes decisive topic in corporate culture. ”

Attendee

★ “ I found this really helpful to have #realtalk. Great hearing from real people of real diversity and their thoughts. ”

Attendee

★ “ DEI is too important to let it be dismissed by powerful naysayers. We need to stay strong in the belief that we are better together than allowing all our progress slip away into the shadows. ”

Attendee

★ “ Insightful into views of a very diverse group and how to inspire and be inspired. You have a voice and are not alone ”

Attendee

★ “ I liked the diverse panel members, especially someone who defines themselves as hard of hearing. ”

Attendee

★ “ Very eye opening, real, inspiring, and a new meaning/understanding for allyship. ”

Attendee

★ “ John added some great insights to supplement the panel's insights ”

Attendee

★ “ This would be great as an organization session for SPY ”

Attendee

★ “ A session on vulnerability and action ”

Attendee

★ “ I had a tough time locating a the session once IN the hall. I think trade floor wayfinding would be helpful for the future! ”

Attendee

★ “ Deep dive into tough questions is necessary. Push further to talk about the uncomfortable aspects of being an Ally. ”

Attendee

★ “ Loved the 60 second rule. Kept the answers concise and focused while keeping the session moving along. ”

Attendee

★ “ If you are going to keep the countdown, stick by it. ”

Attendee

★ “ Keep this topic in the forefront of our thinking! ”

Attendee

★ “ More mics instead of only one ”

Attendee

★ “ Nothing comes to mind ”

Attendee