

Standing Together: The Open Source Ally

Deborah Cross (Rise) in conversation with Saleha Williams (IAMT), Paul Davies (Yospace) and David Ross (Ross Video)

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So welcome to the IAMT Studio. I'm Deborah Cross, the host for this afternoon, and welcome to Standing Together: The Open Source Ally. Today's conversation is really about moving beyond the idea of allyship as a label and getting into what it actually looks like in practice across our industry. We've got a fantastic mix of perspectives here, from leadership through to marketing and industry research. So I'm really looking forward to exploring together in a candid and open way. I'm joined today by Saleha Williams, CEO of the International Association of MediaTech, formerly IABM; Paul Davies, head of marketing at Yospace; and David Ross, CEO at Ross Video. So to kick us off, I'd love to start quite broadly. I think allyship is a term which we hear a lot, but what can it mean? It can mean very different things to different people. So from your perspectives, what does meaningful allyship mean, and what does it look like in action day to day? So, Saleha, if you could sort of take us to start, looking perhaps at sort of action and culture.

Absolutely. So I think there's a difference, in my view, between mentoring and allyship, and both are critical. Mentoring is supporting and coaching and providing the right tool sets and resources and guidance. Allyship is about access, so it's about sponsoring people to get visibility, you know, within the organisation or the wider industry, really advocating for that person or persons to enable them to be visible for promotion, projects, networking. So it's really key to the culture, and this is something over the last 12 months with IAMT that has been incredibly important to me, especially in a remote environment. When you're working remotely on different time zones, different countries, you know, it's hard enough trying to get a great team culture. And so that allyship is critical to how, especially, the senior people in the team are really advocating in meetings, internally, externally with our members, to really make people visible for opportunities, speaking opportunities, and making that part of the culture. It's a day-to-day thing. It should be inherent.

Yes. Yeah. And Paul, who has been a mentor for Rise for many years, could you talk to me a little bit about behaviours and listening and creating safe spaces?

Yeah, sure. So I mean, I think in any kind of management role or role similar to that, it's important to create open and safe spaces for anybody to be able to — allow them to contribute, to be the best version of themselves in their role. I think when you look through the lens of allyship, then it comes with a need to have a greater understanding of the fact that I, as a white male in this industry, have a privilege that lots of other people do not have. And therefore, it's more important that I have an open ear and go into these open spaces to listen and learn and to understand what other people are going through.

Absolutely. And David, does this resonate from a leadership perspective?

Oh, absolutely. I like — kind of like one of the things you were talking about earlier, there's two different dimensions to this. One of the dimensions is, yes, we have mentorship programmes, yes, we're participating in Rise in that way, and that's an opportunity to, you know, allow people to come forward and give them that training, that confidence, and we've had some really big successes in doing that. But then on the other side, there's what I would like to think of as day to day. And I was just having a conversation about, you know, when you as a woman go into a room and, you know, are you treated as an equal? Yes, no. And to me, it's just shocking that, you know, it depends. There's going to be, say, some men in the room that are going to treat you completely as an equal, and you're going to be completely comfortable, and there's other times where you're treated as possibly not as intelligent.

And it makes — or what you're going to contribute is not as important, and to me, that, like, makes no sense whatsoever. So as a manager, when you're in a situation like that, to be aware that not everybody is going to treat women the same way. And I notice, for example, it's not uncommon at all that when we're having a group meeting with maybe seven people in the room and there's two women, and the woman is talking, and all of a sudden a man just starts talking on top of her. And I sit there and go, "Well, that was kind of..." and I'll actually stop and say, "She wasn't done. I really want to hear what she has to say." And that's a subtle thing, but they say culture is what you ignore. And so you want to really make sure that it's the little daily nudges and what you do in management that shows the way.

And that can go to extreme situations as well, where we have had a number of occasions where we have had employees that think it's just our culture that we have a go at just about anybody, any religion, any sort of women, men. Everybody's a target. And that's not okay. And you have maybe a couple of conversations on that, and you realise you're not going to change that person. And that person is then gone. And you're not holding that up in any way of saying, "This is what we do to people like that." It's just that that person is quietly gone.

Yeah, it just doesn't align with your values.

Yeah. It doesn't align, and you don't even have to say that. You don't need to explain it. And so you end up — some people do notice. And so those subtle changes that happen in your organisation, not only is it saying, "This is... I think I know what happened," it's also, you end up with the critical mass of, say, men in the company that just don't do those things. And so that gets better and better, and you get these "Why did you say that?" kind of looks, as opposed to, "We're all guys. We're all friends here."

And where that doesn't happen, Saleha, I know you're particularly passionate and have done quite a bit of research into this. Could you talk to us a little bit more about where you sort of have seen the findings, and in particular in and around behaviours towards women and them leaving the industry?

Sure. Well, you know, let me give you a very recent example for myself. I mean, it's been no secret that coming in as the CEO of IABM, as we were formerly, there were a small minority, I have to say, who did not think a woman should be the CEO of the IABM, now the IAMT. And there were some pretty serious things that happened, serious things. And what I am so thankful for is the board of IAMT, including Ross, literally when it was brought up by our board chair, Josh Arensberg, who said, "This is not acceptable," in terms of, you know... I've been in the industry

over 35 years. I am amazed that things were happening now — you know, when I started at News International and Sky, when I was in my sort of pre-teens, because I studied and worked at the same time, you know, that was a very different culture.

But to see actions and things happening now, and in some ways have actually got worse in certain situations. And what happened was — and I'm going to say this not just because David is here — but Chris from Ross Video, he contacted me. He was the first one straight after that board meeting, and he said, "Look, what can I do to help? We do not accept this. And there's a number of things we can do, but you need to know I am here for you." And a number — or most of our board members, if I'm honest, did the same, but Ross were the first to reach out. And it goes back to what David was saying around this has to be part of the culture of just quietly — you don't need drama. You just need to go, "No, you're not accepting that." And the work you're referring to — when I worked for the London 2012 Olympics, I was working with a lot of psychologists with the sports athletes and got really interested in the area of positive psychology.

So I did a second master's degree in positive psychology, which, if you look at zero as neutral, negative on that scale is anxiety, depression, PTSD and so on. But the other side of that scale is the positive side of how to activate our brains to encourage decision-making, motivation, engagement, dynamics of the individual personality as well as the team. And the research that I did, my thesis focused on why do women leave technology.

And, you know, I'm one of probably three women in my age group who are still in the industry. All of us are in very senior positions. But most of them have left. And the reason for that is, honestly, they just don't want to put up with the politics, being talked over, quite often, you know, just the BS when it is not called out, but it's not dealt with. And, you know, when you're dealing with — you know, a lot of women would leave after they had children because, you know, they're already dealing with trying to manage small children and, you know... And then older women, menopause, it's a thing. I keep saying it. You know, I'm going through it myself. You just kind of go, "You know what? I don't need this, you know, level of additional BS that I need to be dealing with in a day-to-day environment." And I think, you know, it's so sad because especially senior women, you know, 20 years, 30 years, there is a lot of investment and knowledge that has gone into those people. And we need those women to be able to show the way for younger, but it's totally understandable why, you know, a lot of them do leave.

No, absolutely. Absolutely, and we've seen it, you know, hence why Rise is here, right? So this is leading quite nicely onto the next subject, which is seeing across the industry there is progress, we know that, but there are still some real gaps. And so, Paul, can you give me your thoughts on progress? And in your opinion, are you seeing more women in technical roles?

I think at a trade show like an NAB, it's quite hard to get a picture of the women in technical roles in the industry. So at — now, I know, you know, this is — we're at NAB now. This is being broadcast in the future. But at NAB Show, in 8% of the sales meetings that we had, there were women leading the meetings, which is a really low figure. And of that 8%, there were maybe one or two in a technical role. Now, I think that a big challenge for the industry is to improve the face of the industry at the trade shows and at these big public, visible events. Something that I found really, really interesting about being part of the Rise mentor programme was actually being able to meet lots of young women who are in technical roles throughout the industry. And I met, like,

solutions architects, broadcast engineers, and in other roles as well, like revenue operations, sales roles. And you can see that they — you've got the full set of the types of roles across the industry that do have women in them. But I don't see them at the trade shows. And I don't see them in these visible spaces.

And David, from a CEO perspective, how do you see that challenge, particularly when you're balancing talent, innovation, and growth?

Right. So one of the things I think is interesting is the role of HR in this. And one of the nice things, I suppose, here is we have a peculiar lack of men in HR. I think in our HR team we have maybe one or two out of a team of maybe 15. And so they're very underrepresented. But at the same time, that is a powerful advantage for advancing women throughout your organisation, because HR is a major business partner of ours inside the company, and when we're looking for promotions, you know, they are expected to be attuned for any reason why somebody would not be promoted or considered for a role if they are qualified. And so if we see some reason that, you know, this manager just keeps promoting men over women that they feel, and their experience with them has not been appropriate, then they will raise their hand.

They're not — I think they would do it with great enthusiasm, in fact. And the head of HR as well is female, so it goes all the way up, and I have regular meetings with her. At the same time, while we want to do mentoring and things like that, I think the last thing we want to do is promote somebody beyond the level of their competence, because that does a negative impact on, "Look at this woman. She's been promoted into that role. She doesn't deserve it." And maybe she'll grow into it. You absolutely promote people into roles that they're going to grow into, but you don't want to do it into a position where they're probably going to fail and leave them there, because that's just not good for anybody.

No. No, and no reason anyway, right?

Yeah. And then they may never —

Fill a gap. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. And when we talk about closing gaps, mentorship often comes up as a solution, but there's also this idea of sponsorship, which feels quite different. So, Paul, can you explain the mentoring foundations firstly?

Yeah, of course. And I think that — I mean, my experience as a mentor within the Rise programme had kind of different elements to it, because in some cases you're playing a supporting role through active listening and just being there, not even as a sounding board, but just as a board. And then — or even a mirror, where, by going through the act of talking through problems, the mentee just comes up with the solutions themselves, just by having someone to talk to. And my experience last year was very much that. And in other cases, I would say that where it can become more difficult as a mentor is knowing when to intervene, when to... You generally try and avoid making suggestions, but you want to encourage the mentee to reach the answer themselves, because they're smart. They know all the answers themselves. They know them better than I do. It's just trying to help them get there.

Yeah. Yeah. And then they never leave, do they? You're always there as a mentor, ongoing.

Which is fantastic, which I love.

Indeed. Absolutely. And, Saleha, could you sort of talk us through your thoughts or your opinions of what sponsorship is versus mentorship?

So for me, sponsorship is access and visibility. You know, it is... Mentorship is providing those toolkits, guidance, coaching, you know, the sort of where do you need help with certain things or getting through something. Sponsorship is how do I provide access and visibility, that is, in everyday situations, talking up people that you think should be — "Hey, this person could be on this project," or, "I know you're looking at putting this new team together." And, you know, doing that actively within the business, not just doing it with HR, so that this becomes a culture of collaboration and inclusion. And I think, you know, I think the other thing to say is, I mean, I've been asked this a lot. You know, I can talk for England, and I love, you know, public speaking. We had a great Impact Briefing here. I've done a number of keynotes. But not all women want to be on stage or doing public speaking.

Some people find that very terrifying anyway. So I think, you know, the other ways around, you know, sponsorship is, you know, at the trade shows, there are also the technical papers, the presentations, you know, the content that is thought leadership, where they may not want to present it. They should be doing that too, absolutely. Or we need more women doing that too, I should say. Sorry. But what I mean is, you know, at NAB, IBC, you know, there are these opportunities to have. If you've got women in your team who have been a co-author on a technical paper, or a white paper or playbook, you know, ensure their name is on it and that visibility is there. And, you know, one of the things that we've announced as part of our new branding here as IAMT is the IAMT marketplace, and this is an Amazon-style page for all of our members where you're actively able to put thought leadership, in addition to what we do with you.

So journal articles — let's get more women into our journal. But your own white papers, products, services, you know, all of that can go into the marketplace. You know, it's included in membership, and then we've built the industry's... sorry, the world's first industry agentic AI model. So again, this is going to crawl the marketplace. And I would encourage all our members, anyone in the industry, to really advocate for women to be more visible, even if it's not necessarily speaking. But let's help them with others.

With different platforms, creating different voices. And recognition.

And the MAI agentic AI model — we've called her MAI. She's female. You can talk to her. She talks back as well as typing. She has a female... She has an American accent. We didn't go with a British accent. But that is also then obviously going to build through AEO, answer engine optimisation, you know, those voices in the industry that will then be picked up wider, not just at IAMT, but across ChatGPT and Claude, GPT. So again, that's, for me, sponsorship. And it's getting members and companies to realise that's another way to increase visibility of women in the industry.

Yeah. Fabulous. Really fantastic. And David, how easy or how difficult is it to embed that kind of sponsorship into leadership behaviours at scale?

Well, I think one of the things is that what gets measured gets done. And one of the things that we do look at here is what percentage of our company is male and female, and then we look at marketing, we look at sales, we look at R&D, and all sorts of different roles in the organisation.

And we see what percentages they're at, but we also look at the last five-year trends. And having that in front of me on a quarterly basis as well, you sit there and go, "Well, that area's doing okay. I feel better about that. But that area, it went down." And you say, "Well, why is that? Are we not hiring enough new students in? Are we making some wrong decisions in our hiring or in a promotion side of things?" And so you can have a certain level of subtle rooting for certain people.

You sit there and go, "Well, you know, I don't have enough female demo artists," or something like that, "on our equipment." And, you know, that person's a trainer, wonderful personality, really outgoing. Maybe she can move into that next level. And you just drop a few little hints, like, "I think she'd be great. I..." You know, "Have you considered..." and so on, because sometimes you — people just get promoted into roles because they're there and it was an obvious choice, and I think that's actually one of the ways you can do these things. There's other things you could do as well where, you know, in sales, for example, our sales in our industry is often extremely technical but also relationship-based. And what I've noticed over the years is some of our best salespeople have been female. And why is it, if our best salespeople have been female, that we have more male salespeople than female salespeople?

But, like, why do I want to shoot myself in the foot here? But on the other hand, when you're growing, you start, you know, you start having to also get people who have previous, pre-existing relationships, and you go around the industry and you say, "Let's grab that person out of a competitor, because they'll do great for us." And so that perpetuates the male side of things most of the time. Not always, but most of the time, because that's the nature of our industry. But at the same time, just like in HR, there's a peculiar demographic of inside sales where you have more women than men again. So it used to be that inside sales did what it did, and then outside sales did what they did, and now, of course, there's a career track that goes up. And so all of a sudden, by the very nature of inside sales being a path to outside sales, you end up increasing over years the percentage of women you have in those roles. So those are the little subtle touches you can do as a manager or an owner of the company to make those things happen.

Yeah. Can I mention something that was really eye-opening for some of our male sales guys in a previous corporate that I worked with? So we had over 300,000 people in this corporate, and we did our leadership — you know, the top 100 leadership global event. And the CEO said, "Right. How many women... Or can all the women in the room stand up? Of the top 100 people." You know, so these are the very senior leaders. "Can all the women in the room stand up?" So the women stood up, and there was probably about 10 or 12, I can't quite remember, because my point is he then said, "If you are customer-facing, remain standing, and the rest of you sit down." There were three. And what he then said was, "And here is the percentage of female buyers in our existing client base." You know, look around the room, guys.

This isn't just about the number of women compared to men in the leadership track, but it is also, you know, again, women buy... I'm not saying women don't buy from men, of course I'm not, but, you know, if you're... It's like generations. People need to see themselves, and younger generations want to see themselves, whether that's gender-based or, you know, different backgrounds, different religion, et cetera. And I think it was one of those very subtle ways of saying to very senior, very experienced leaders, "Hey, just take a note of this." And as you say,

then, you know, let's look in the next quarter, and what does your talent pipeline look like in terms of women who are either coming into roles, being promoted, and particularly those who are customer-facing.

Yeah. Yeah. It feels a lot like it comes down to where you sit in an organisation and what you can influence and how. And so I'd love to explore how allyship shows up differently at different levels. So, Saleha, what about sort of middle management versus exec strategy?

So I think for me, culture comes down from the top and bottom up, and the hardest place for that sometimes to really resonate is in middle management. Because it's, you know, you need your senior executive team to be walking the talk, and this is inherent in culture. And choosing those leaders to do that, you know, is a key part of, you know, I think the most successful strategies that most companies have. Building the pipeline coming up from students or graduates, you know, young professionals coming in, again, it's easier to do that in some ways, as long as you're looking at the pipeline — the talent pipeline. The hardest part is that middle part, because you're trying to then maybe change unconscious bias in some cases. You know, you're dealing with people who have significant experience but don't always think about these things. So I think at the middle management level, again, it's as David said and Paul was saying on the mentoring side, it's about just, you know, showing the values in action in the company all the way from the top, all the way through to, you know, the new people coming in.

And I think recognising and celebrating that, not in a way that is saying, "Okay, it's..." — you know, as you said, we're not going to promote women for the sake of it. You promote the best talent, but are you looking at the whole pool here, as opposed to just, "Oh, you know, I've known this person in the company a long time, because I've been here or in the industry." So for me, it's that pincer point of keeping in mind that from leadership with middle managers, and encouraging the input of the entire talent pipeline, as you, again, you know, hopefully then bring them into middle management as they grow.

Yeah, yeah. And it's as David talked about regarding sort of the executive-level accountability and having that bigger picture, but building that culture. But, Paul, what about day-to-day team culture? Can you give us —

Yeah, I mean, I think, for me, it comes back again to this idea of the open, safe space, which includes what we're talking about, that men can often talk over women. And it's just about creating that listening space as well, and allowing... which is a principle that should be applied across the board. It's allowing people to express themselves, to be able to voice an opinion, to not be afraid to voice something that isn't popular as an idea, but you want all of those ideas. And I think that if you don't have that, then the threat is that you lose ideas, and you lose different perspectives, and you end up with a bunch of men coming up with the same idea again and again in the end, and not being creative.

Yeah, yeah. And it's that — and again, we talked about these platforms, didn't we? And it's... It's multifaceted, so it could be — it's in meetings, it's in reviews, it's hiring decisions, as we sort of spoke about. So one thing that often comes up alongside this is confidence, and who gets seen and who gets heard. So in terms of allyship amplification, Paul, sort of storytelling and visibility, could you sort of, again, explore that with us?

Storytelling and visibility. Yes. So do you mean from the mentor perspective?

Yeah, yeah. Or just sort of this opportunity to, you know, champion and empower women within the organisation.

Yeah. Well, if I go back to the Rise mentor programme again, and we talked about trying to support women, to give them more of a voice, to feel more confident, whether they're on stage or giving presentations. And I think that one element of the mentor programme that I think not everyone will realise is that there's a full training schedule that comes with that as part of the programme. And then an element of that is about public speaking. It's about presenting, and not necessarily for the purpose of encouraging people to speak on a stage, but it's about sharing your ideas internally and being heard, and presenting your ideas in a way that will be picked up by other people, and giving people more confidence to have their own voice. And I think that that is really valuable, and I think that one of the things that I take away from that programme is about applying some of those principles every day.

And, you know, mentoring — if you're in a management role, then mentoring is a constant part of your job, and you're trying to make people improve, and you want people to be able to speak up. And again, it comes back to sharing ideas and being confident in their own skin. As a manager, it's your job to help bring that out.

Yeah. Yeah. And how much impact do you think visibility really does have on shifting perceptions?

Oh, it's huge. It's absolutely massive. I would say it's one of the most important things that you can do. And we — I mean, we were talking about the number of people in a customer-facing role and the importance that that has on meeting other people and trying to sell from one woman to another woman. Well, as a general principle, salespeople connect with other like-minded people just on a human level, and that relationship building is absolutely fundamental. And I think that if you bring that out more, by more women in sales roles selling to women in, say, technical roles, then you can only benefit from that.

Yeah. Yeah. And Saleha, how do we ensure that amplification is equitable so that people are not just visible, but they're properly credited for their work?

Absolutely. So I think this is the difference around, you know, what real inclusion is. It isn't just saying we need more women. We do need more women. But we need women to excel at what they're doing and making that visible. So that equitable viewpoint for me is, you know, if I'm trying to get from here to here in my career, you know, how do we help them do that? And if they are — there's technical skillsets that play out, whether it's, I mean, HR, marketing, or technology technical skillsets. But then there's also, you know, things around flexible working, understanding, you know, you have women who have huge knowledge and are building their experience, and how do we enable them to continue to be successful, powerful, influential, you know, however you're measuring that, through providing the right structure to support that. And I think that has come a long way, you know, post-COVID, with remote working, hybrid working, et cetera.

But it's also realising it's not a one-size-fits-all. In the same way, if you look at, you know, disability or other areas of diversity, there's no point in providing somebody who's in a wheelchair, you know, something that's not going to enable them to get into a room, whether that's a ramp or whatever. Same is true with women. Think of, you know, what do they need?

Because at the end of the day, as leaders, we are here to grow our businesses. So it's, you know, how do we support our people, all our people, to be as successful as possible, whatever those metrics of success are, and making it work for them in a way that enables innovation, collaboration, and helps to build that confidence. And I think, going back to what Paul was saying around, you know, the visibility, one of the things that came out in the research that I did was, you would think, you know, seeing people like Oprah Winfrey or Michelle Obama, they were seen as, you know, incredible role models.

But actually, what a lot of younger women were saying is, "We want to see the women in our company. We want to see the women in our industry. Because if I can see her, I can be her." Yes, we love to see what Michelle Obama talks about, and she's a wonderful speaker, a wonderful author. But that accessibility of, okay, this woman made it to this kind of job or level of job, whatever that is. So, you know, we need to make them more visible, because that helps grow the confidence of younger women that I can be that woman in my company, in this industry.

Yeah. And I think that's one of the beauties of the Rise community, because, you know, it's from very, very early-on stages of careers right the way through to senior executive and C-suite, and it's those role models, the positivity around, "I can be that." There is no longer a glass ceiling. No, I totally agree. So what I'd love to close on is, if someone listening to this is thinking, "I want to be a better ally," what would be the one practical thing they could start doing tomorrow? David?

Live it. I mean, in the end, it's what you do. If you're an ally and you're in a leadership position, people are watching how you act. And you always have to have that thing in the back of your mind going, "Is what's happening at this particular moment all right? And how do I just give it the little nudge that shows on a regular basis this is our culture? This is how we do it throughout the organisation."

Yeah. Super. And Paul?

Yeah, to echo all of those points, but also just say that... Sorry. Sorry.

Take your time.

I've gone blank. I had a great idea, and then I was listening to David more and got absorbed into that. Oh, no, no, I've got it again. So coming back to where we started, it's about — and a point that I made at the start — was about acknowledging your own privilege, recognising that you, as a male in the industry, are in a position of privilege, and therefore you need to recognise that other people do not have that same privilege. And when you do that, then just become more conscious of speaking over women, allowing women more space to project their ideas, whether it's in meetings or in one-to-ones, when you're in a management role. And just being aware of that every day.

Yeah. Yeah. And, Saleha?

So I echo all of that. I was going to say be it, but I think live it is actually key, and again, everything Paul's just said. I think maybe one practical tip to add to that would be, especially in remote team meetings, if you're doing video calls as well as, you know, in-person teams, if you're chairing that meeting, just take a moment at the beginning to just look around the room

and go, "Okay, let's make sure every voice is heard." And as David said, you know, if somebody does talk over somebody else, A, that's rude. I'm sorry, that's just rude anyway. Unless it's huge excitement for a fabulous new project and you're getting all of that in. But even then, just, you know, take that intentional moment to say, "Okay, are all the voices around this table being heard?" And especially if it's a remote video call, because it's harder to do that when you've got, you know, 10 faces in front of you. And take a minute at the end to say, "Hey, you know, is there anything else, you know, you'd like to contribute?" And, you know, that increases that visibility, and sometimes people need that invitation — women especially — to just speak or add. If they don't, it's fine, but create the opportunity.

Yeah. Brilliant. All super points. Thank you so much. So this really has been a really valuable conversation, and thank you for bringing such honesty and practical insight to it. I think what's really stood out is that allyship isn't just one thing. It's a series of consistent actions, whether that's creating space, amplifying voices, or actively sponsoring talent. And it's something that requires effort at every single level. So it's day-to-day interactions. It's right the way through to leadership and organisational strategy. So thank you again to our panel and thank you for listening. And before we wrap, I just want to highlight the work that Rise are doing. We are a not-for-profit organisation, and everything we've talked about today from building confidence to creating opportunity and visibility relies on the support and the funding that enables those programmes to exist. So if this conversation has resonated and if you want to be part of what we do and driving real change in our industry, we'd love to hear from you. But again, thank you so much for contributing.

Thank you so much, Deborah.

Thank you.