

Hidden Intersections: Religion and Veteran Status at Work

Proactive Diversity & Inclusion strategies address not only a range of identifiers, but also the intersections between them—even if these intersections are not immediately apparent. Tanenbaum works with our Corporate Members to explore the intersections between religion and other identifiers, and we help companies proactively address these intersections to create truly inclusive workplaces. In the last Corporate Member newsletter, we explored the intersection of religious and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identities in the workplace, and we have previously written on the [intersection of disability and religion](#). In recognition of Veterans Day (November 11th), this newsletter considers another workplace intersection: religion and veteran status. The overlap between these two identifiers may not be immediately obvious, and perhaps not as widely discussed as that of religion and sexual orientation. But for employers who are committed to creating a work environment where veterans and employees of all faiths and none feel safe and respected, this intersection must be examined.

Historically, the U.S. military has strong religious ties. Before 1972, all service academies held mandatory religious services. That year, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia found this practice unconstitutional (*Anderson v. Laird*). Though today services are voluntary, prayer and other religious activities continue to be prominent at military academies. Unfortunately, there have been reports of proselytizing and pressure to participate in prayer in various areas of the military, even though participation is not officially required.ⁱ There is also the experience of being in combat, which, for some,



may be a spiritual experience or could lead to a change in religiosity or spirituality. Colonel David Sutherland, co-founder and Chairman of the Easter Seals Dixon Center and an expert on veteran inclusion at work, has shared that being in combat has made him more spiritual and that “On the battlefield you find God real quick.” (Keep in mind that different veterans have different relationships between their combat experience and spirituality, since there is diversity in the religious makeup of the armed forces and this diversity is inevitably reflected in the veterans returning to work and the military families that

employers seek to support.) Sutherland also pointed out that servicemen and women have the support of military chaplains while serving, but when they return to civil society they unfortunately lose that resource. This may exacerbate feelings of disconnectedness in different areas of life, including work.

“ **Sutherland finds that what veterans want most when returning to work is simply to fit in.** ”

While most companies do not have onsite chaplains, many have employee resource groups (ERGs) for veterans and/or faith-based groups. This pre-existing resource can be leveraged to support veterans in the workplace. Sutherland finds that what veterans want most when returning to work is simply to fit in. A veterans ERG that considers the religious and/or spiritual needs of members, or a faith-based ERG that is welcoming to and inclusive of veterans (or faith-based and veterans ERGs that are able to collaborate) could go a long way in creating a more hospitable environment for servicemen and women returning to work.

“ **Roughly 20% of servicemen and women have “no religious preference.”** ”ⁱⁱ

Companies must also be mindful of the fact that not all veterans identify as spiritual and/or religious. Many are familiar with the old adage “there are no atheists in foxholes,” but the numbers show that this is not the case. In fact, data from the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMD) suggests that roughly 20% of servicemen and women have “no religious preference.”ⁱⁱ Veterans may find the assumption that they had religious or spiritual experiences while in combat oppressive, and

making this assumption could lead to unintended negative consequences. For example, imagine a well-meaning manager who hires a recently returned veteran and invites her to a lunch time prayer session, not knowing that the employee is in fact an atheist. Now the employee is faced with the uncomfortable decision of attending a prayer session that goes against her beliefs, or potentially offending her new boss. Veterans who have experienced these assumptions in the military may be especially uncomfortable to find them showing up again in their new place of work. Veterans may also be less comfortable turning down a boss’s invitation to pray than other employees would be, given the chain of command and more direct communication styles that veterans may be familiar with.ⁱⁱⁱ

“ **These real or perceived feelings could have a serious, negative impact on teamwork if they remain unaddressed.** ”

There are many ways in which assumptions about veterans can create discomfort and tension in the workplace. Imagine a Muslim employee who joins a new team in her company and finds that she will be working closely with a colleague who is a veteran. Both the Muslim employee and the veteran may assume that the other will have negative feelings about them because of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These real or perceived feelings could have a serious, negative impact on teamwork if they remain unaddressed.

Faith-based groups must also be aware of potential pitfalls in well-meaning attempts to include veterans. Imagine that, in a misguided attempt to make conversation and get to know a recently joined veteran, other ERG members ask “Did you kill anyone over there? If so, would you like to pray together for forgiveness?” This could inadvertently



cause the veteran to relive painful memories and possibly force them to defend their religiosity in ways they would rather avoid doing.

- i. Pew Forum “Accommodating Faith in the Military”
- ii. Defense Manpower Data Center, 2009
- iii. http://www.va.gov/vetsinworkplace/docs/em_challengesReadjust.html

“**Assuming the best intentions can go a long way.**”

At the heart of the examples above are miscommunication and a lack of understanding. The manager who invites the new employee to a prayer session likely intended to make that employee feel welcome, included, and supported, but in fact does the opposite. The manager was probably operating under the Golden Rule—to treat others the way you would like to be treated. The Platinum Rule (one of Tanenbaum’s [Tips for Respectful Communication](#)) goes a step further and encourages the user to treat others the way they (the other person) would like to be treated. But how do you know how the other person wants to be treated? You’ll probably have to ask. This may seem intimidating or uncomfortable, but asking respectful questions upfront will help you avoid inadvertently offending a coworker or team member down the line.

When awkward conversations do arise, try to start with the assumption that the person you’re talking to is coming from a place of sincerity and a desire to help. A comment like “so did you kill anyone over there?” likely reads as rude and confrontational. But maybe it was a gaffe borne out of discomfort and unease in the face of an intimidating situation. Assuming the best intentions can go a long way in de-escalating such a scenario. (This is one of very few times when we encourage people to assume!)

Avoiding stereotypes, fostering open communication, and expecting the best from one another are better practices that help to create inclusivity in all areas of D&I, not just religion and veteran status. We encourage our Corporate Members to consider the specific ways that they can proactively address this particular intersection, as well as leverage these broader better practices.

