

# TANENBAUM

## CORPORATE MEMBERSHIP

TANENBAUM CENTER FOR INTERRELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING • OCTOBER 2012

## PREPARING FOR THE DECEMBER DILEMMA

As the “holiday season” fast-approaches, HR practitioners and managers will likely face increased challenges around coordinating schedules, managing time off requests, and accommodating employees’ religious needs. At Tanenbaum, we typically refer to the holiday season as “The December Dilemma,” a particularly difficult time of year to proactively address religious diversity. In addition to managing increased accommodation and scheduling requests, HR managers must mitigate competing interests:

- Non-Christian employees and customers might feel unwelcome or uncomfortable during December.
- Christian employees and customers might feel disappointed that a religiously significant time of year was ignored or secularized.



We certainly see instances in which Christian and non-Christian colleagues alike feel marginalized by the way their employer addresses the holidays in December. This newsletter will provide you with some of our better practices around proactively preparing for “The December Dilemma,” and some ideas for seizing this opportunity to raise awareness, increase knowledge and leverage the religious diversity within your organization. These tips will provide you with the building blocks you need to make employees and customers of all faiths — or none — feel included year round. Remember, if an issue arises, don’t hesitate to call upon the Tanenbaum team for help.

## TIME OFF & SCHEDULING

The most common official holidays in American workplaces are federal and Christian holidays. Nearly 100% of employers offer Christmas as a vacation day but few workplaces offer Jewish, Muslim or Hindu holidays as part of the official holiday calendar. We encourage employers to allow for flexible holiday options, like “holiday swapping,” which would allow an employee to work on Christmas Day, and take that time off for Diwali, for example.

Employees observing “lesser known” or less common holidays may request to take time off to observe. Regularly refer to an interfaith calendar to better anticipate employees’ needs:

- Microsoft Outlook provides an excellent interfaith calendar, which can raise all employees’ awareness around upcoming holidays in the areas of the world in which you do business. **Instructions:** Go to File, then Options, then Calendar, and there’s a button in the middle of the pop-up that says “add holidays to calendar.” You can select the countries where you do business and the relevant holidays will appear on your Outlook calendar.
- BBC has created a thorough interfaith calendar as well. This interfaith calendar can be found at the following web address: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/tools/calendar/>.

“ Remember to reevaluate long-standing traditions. Do not wait until you hear complaints from employees.”

While these calendars can be extremely helpful, never make assumptions about your employees' needs. Employees' religiosity and practices can and will change over time. Perhaps an employee has become more or less devout, has switched denominations, or is partnered with an individual of another faith and needs to request extra time off for holiday observances. Check in regularly about your employees' time off and accommodation needs.

## HOLIDAY PARTIES

Every workplace environment is different. At some companies, individual departments will go out for dinner to celebrate the end of the year. Other companies hold extravagant end-of-year holiday parties where attendance is mandatory. Whatever the case, we have some general ground rules.

Schedule the event at a time that everyone can likely participate. If you know, for example, that an Orthodox Jewish employee must be home every Friday evening to observe the Sabbath, do not hold this event on a Friday evening. If an employee declines to participate altogether (perhaps due to a religious objection, like a Jehovah's Witness who does not celebrate holidays) make sure you provide them the opportunity to engage in networking at another time.

Offer halal, kosher, and vegetarian options for everyone. You can gather information about employees' dietary needs prior to the event. If an employee abstains from alcohol, ask them directly what would make them feel comfortable at the event. Consider serving alcohol in a separate and designated area, or not at all.

Remember to reevaluate long-standing traditions. For example, perhaps your office always organizes a "Secret Santa" gift exchange, or always supports a donation drive for a religiously-based charity organization. If these traditions are not in line with your current anti-discrimination or Diversity & Inclusion policies, reconsider the tradition altogether. Do not wait until you hear complaints from employees.

## DECORATIONS

Some companies have chosen to ban holiday-themed decorations altogether and choose to decorate common areas with non-denominational winter-themed decorations. However, in our benchmarking at Tanenbaum, we've found that the holiday season can become an excellent opportunity to educate the general employee population about diverse traditions. For instance, some companies may equally represent holidays with a lobby exhibit, accompanied by a short explanation and history of each holiday. This type of exhibit might include **Hanukah (Jewish)**, **Winter Solstice or Yule (Pagan)**, **Christmas (Christian and Orthodox Christian)**, and **Kwanzaa (secular/cultural)**, for example. In other words, "being inclusive" does not necessarily mean banning all holiday decorations or going with "non-denominational" themes.

Addressing all religious traditions and holidays may seem daunting or even impossible. If you're interested in using your decorations as an opportunity to educate employees about different faiths, don't be afraid to ask your employees about upcoming holidays that they would like to increase awareness around with an anonymous online survey. Survey Monkey is a web survey development site which is cost-effective and easy to use: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/>. You can also refer to the Outlook interfaith calendar and the BBC interfaith calendar to identify upcoming holidays to address. Some lesser known holidays that fall before December 25th, 2012 include **Sukkot (Jewish)**, **the Eid-UI-Adha (Muslim)**, **Birth of the Bab (Baha'i)**, **Samhain or Hallowe'en (Pagan)**, **All Saints' Day (Christian)**, **Diwali (Hindu, Jain, Sikh and Buddhist)**, **Al-Hijra (Muslim)**, and **Bodhi Day (Buddhist)**.

Acknowledging diverse traditions and holidays can occur outside of the traditional holiday season. Consider creating an ongoing bulletin board or display, with educational resources about religious and secular holidays throughout the year. These initiatives can be employee-driven and draw upon the knowledge of your culturally and religiously diverse employees. And of course, Tanenbaum is here to serve as a resource to provide insight and suggestions.

“ ‘Being inclusive’ does not necessarily mean banning all holiday decorations.”

