

Pride Month and Religious Observers: Proactively Including Diversity and Managing Conflict



Photo by Benson Kuo

Workplace tension between some religions' beliefs and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender interests is one of the most sensitive diversity and inclusion issues companies face. For years Tanenbaum has been investigating this issue, providing better practices for mitigating tensions at the Out & Equal Workplace Summit, and working with our clients to implement policies that carefully balance competing interests.

Over the years, we've seen conflicts around this topic manifest in countless ways. Depending on your company's location, demographics, and culture, certain issues are likely to arise more frequently than others. For instance, perhaps:

- **You overhear disparaging conversations and language about employees' sexuality and gender identities. When the employees who are speaking are later confronted about their behavior, they say it reflects their sincerely held religious beliefs. What do you do next?**
- **An employee is asked to sign a congratulations card for a colleague recently engaged to a same sex partner and refuses to sign, due to her religious beliefs. Do you say something?**
- **You work with mostly secular individuals. A co-worker who identifies as both lesbian and devoutly Christian feels uncomfortable revealing her religiosity to her colleagues and managers for fear of ridicule. You know the real story. Now what?**
- **You work internationally, and struggle to translate your company's policies around support of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights because of the region's legal, religious and political stance on homosexuality. Who can help you?**
- **You receive countless requests from employees to form religious employee resource groups during pride month, in an effort to stand in opposition to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employee resource group's programming. What should your company's response be?**

It may seem that religious employees and employees who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender are inherently very different from one another, and that their experiences in the workplace are dissimilar. But regardless of how employees identify, their concerns are often remarkably similar. Both religious and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees may be concerned that their core identities are not being supported or have been threatened or disrespected in some way.

Whether you're addressing conflicts on a large scale through planning your company's global approach to pride month (June), or on a small scale through coaching an employee around appropriate behavior in the workplace, there are a few items to keep in mind:

1. **Remember that people have multiple identities:** “religious people” and “lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people” are not mutually exclusive groups and are not always at odds.
 - a. According to a Barna Group report published in 2008, 60% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals in the U.S. described their faith to be “very important in their lives.”
 - b. A 2012 Pew survey found increases in support for gay marriage from many Catholics and Protestants.
2. **Keep policies and practices aligned with the business case for diversity,** so conversations are always grounded in neutral, non-political or non-religious territory. All of your company’s policies should address the behavior of the employees – not employees’ beliefs.
3. **Turn tense situations into opportunities** for coaching and learning for your employees and your clients.
4. **Conflicts are often nuanced.** There’s no formula for addressing conflicts around lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender employees and religious beliefs. It’s important to remember that no one identifier supersedes another in the workplace. Regardless of how people identify, respect should always be the underlying factor in determining the right accommodation or solution to a problem.

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Last year, a company came to us with a problem. Its diversity and inclusion department sponsored an “Allies Button Day” in honor of pride month. Allies of lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender individuals (that is, people who support LGBT individuals) were invited to wear buttons on their shirts during pride month.

The announcement of the initiative sparked instant backlash from religious employees in two distinct ways:

- Some employees wrote inflammatory comments on the company’s online forum, condemning homosexuality and the company’s support of pride month. The comments were perceived as hateful and discriminatory by employees identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, as well as their allies. Some of those employees replied with equally insensitive comments about religious identities. Anger, division and conflict escalated.
- Other employees complained that they felt marginalized for not wearing the allies button. These employees came to human resources fearing that by not participating, they would bring unnecessary attention to their personal beliefs – including their religious beliefs – which they preferred to keep private.

Teachable Moments

- The employees mentioned in the former example should be trained in respectful communication and the company’s diversity and inclusion policies. It should be made clear that the company acknowledges the right to all religious beliefs (including non-beliefs)–but that religious beliefs or non-beliefs never entitle employees to behave disrespectfully in the workplace. In addition, the company can reinforce that the guidelines for the online forum are rooted in the diversity strategy and core mission and values of the company. Respectful exchanges about differences is the expectation.
- The latter example of people who prefer not to be “outed” for their religious beliefs could be considered another “teachable moment” for the company. Programs and initiatives that seem inclusive to some may result in excluding others. Of course, playing to the needs of each and every individual is impossible. However, in this case, communication guidelines around the “Allies Button Day” could have been distributed to all employees in a way that proactively anticipated and addressed concerns of those who preferred not to participate in the initiative. The communication guidelines should be explicit in the voluntary nature of the initiative, and about the expectation that all employees are to be treated with respect regardless of their participation.

As you prepare for pride month this June, be sure to keep in mind our tips for mitigating conflict and creating a truly inclusive environment for all employees. And, as always, if you have a question or want to brainstorm, we are available to assist with your initiatives!

