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TAKE THE LEAD



Women of Faith in the Workplace

American workplaces are often not set up to support religiously observant workers, particularly women. Here are some tips on how to create a more inclusive workplace for women of faith.

BY LIZ JOSLIN

FOR HEDIEH FAKHRIYAZDI, FAITH comes up every day at the office. Working as a senior manager in global diversity and social responsibility at Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP, she is responsible for aiding in the recruitment, retention, and advancement of diverse talent. Fakhriyazdi says her work directly connects to her faith. “I feel a tremendous amount of coherence between what I believe as a Bahá’í and as a spiritual being, and what I do day-to-day as a working professional,” she says. “My professional work is about building capacity. It’s about

the betterment of people and the betterment of organizations and society.”

Fakhriyazdi is one of three women who shared their experiences on what it means to be a woman of faith in Corporate America with the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, and how their gender intersects with religious identity at work. For more than 15 years, the Tanenbaum Center, a nonprofit with the mission of combating religious prejudice, has worked with corporate clients to help them create more inclusive work environments for employees of all faiths and of none. Over the years, my colleagues and I at Tanenbaum have heard personal stories from clients and trainees about the specific challenges that women face around religion in the workplace.

For instance, after an introductory training on religious diversity in the workplace, a member of our staff was approached by a participant. She was an observant Christian who covered her hair and dressed

modestly due to her religious beliefs. She shared that sometimes she felt disrespected by female coworkers because of her attire. She was hurt and noted that it was especially painful because this behavior was coming from women from whom she expected understanding.

Because of this woman’s story, and others like it, we wanted to dive deeper into this topic. We wanted to hear from more women in Corporate America about their experiences—and to share their stories with you.

Hedieh Fakhriyazdi, Elana Weinstein of Bloomberg LP, and Stephanie Battaglino of Follow Your Heart LLC spoke with Tanenbaum about their experiences as women of faith in the workplace and what they’ve seen happen to their colleagues. These conversations highlighted the way that faith and spirituality can positively impact work, but also presented the unique challenges they encounter, such as scheduling and asking for accommodations.

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Understanding commitments to religion

Elana Weinstein, a longtime D&I practitioner and coach, identifies as Jewish. Her identity is more cultural than religious in nature, but that doesn't mean she lacks commitment to her faith. When the High Holidays come around, she has to take time off to attend services. But that's not always easy when working at a large corporation.

Weinstein sees these challenges come up for other Jewish female colleagues. "Around holiday time," she says, "it seems that women sometimes bear more of a burden around needing to get home in advance of the holiday to prepare the household." Among their tasks, they must make sure that children, if they have them, have proper clothes and are ready for synagogue. There is significant preparation involved in Jewish holidays (similar to hosting Thanksgiving dinner), and men, it seems, may not feel this burden to the same degree. This extends to Sabbath observance, Weinstein explains: "I've worked with men over the years who are more religious and do observe the Sabbath, and they make it clear that their hours are what their hours are . . . it seems that they are more direct about their need to observe and take care of what they need to do."

Weinstein recognizes that this observation applies to gender roles more broadly in the workplace. She has noticed how "women often feel that they have to make excuses if they have to leave at a certain time or if they have to take a child to a doctor's appointment, and many men don't exhibit that same pressure to explain." From a personal perspective, when it comes to explaining herself and

her religious observances to colleagues, Weinstein says she doesn't mind. "I would rather have someone ask the question and have the opportunity to educate them around it. I feel like if they're asking the question, they want to learn, and they want to understand."

Multiple religions in the workplace is a positive

Hedieh Fakhriyazdi understands this perspective. She has spent a lot of time explaining herself and her religion, but similarly sees this as a way to educate others about her beliefs and practice. She follows the tenets of the Bahá'í faith, a monotheistic global religion that originated in 19th-century Persia. Drinking is prohibited, which often raises questions from her peers and colleagues. Not only was the drinking culture pervasive in college, but it continues to have a presence during networking events, social gatherings, and business dinners in corporate environments.

Fakhriyazdi attends these functions to show her support (and is often involved in planning them), but it can be uncomfortable when, inevitably, someone asks her why she's not drinking. "I'm always forthcoming about the fact that it is a religious value for me to not partake in drinking, but this can sometimes catch people off guard," says Fakhriyazdi. However, on the whole, she feels she can handle these conversations much more comfortably now than during her undergraduate years: "When you're younger, you're less comfortable highlighting how or why you are different. As I have gotten older, I feel more confident in the personal decisions



I make that relate back to my religious values. That sense of empowerment makes it easier to share why I make certain lifestyle decisions that seem to challenge the status quo."

Other aspects of Fakhriyazdi's identity also make her stand out in Corporate America. "There is a lot of complexity and intersectionality due to my race, my ethnicity, my gender, and my faith, all of which are not the standard," she says. One area where this is especially apparent is when she seeks a mentor or sponsor. "I have never, in a professional setting, had an Iranian Bahá'í woman serve as my mentor," she says. "Of course it would be nice, but frankly, there are so few of us in Corporate America to begin with." But that doesn't mean she has been unable to find effective mentors and sponsors during her career. As she wisely points out, "There is a common assumption that mentors should share a similar background as you," she says. "I actually would argue that having a diverse slate of mentors and sponsors to help guide you throughout your career will lead to greater success and opportunities overall."

Fakhriyazdi also notes that mentors and sponsors can serve as allies when asking for a religious accommodation. There are numerous Bahá'í holy days throughout the year, but the Bahá'í New

Year (around March 21) is the one that Fakhriyazdi consistently takes off from work. Even when she is in a supportive work environment, she still feels guilty and “incredibly sheepish” about asking for the day off. Similar to Weinstein’s observation that her Jewish male colleagues do not always share their female counterparts’ hesitance to ask for time off, this is one area where Fakhriyazdi observes her gender and religious identities intersecting. She suspects that her Bahá’í male colleagues don’t feel guilty about asking for days off for observance. She believes that having a mentor or sponsor who backs you up when requesting time off can make a big difference in how included and respected any employee feels in the workplace.

Fortunately, in Fakhriyazdi’s case, her supervisors are supportive of her adjusting her schedule to attend various Bahá’í activities and holy day celebrations. That flexibility is a win-win: Fakhriyazdi is happier and more productive at work when she is able to maintain the balance that allows her to honor her religious commitments and fulfill her work responsibilities at the same time.

Flexibility is the key

Stephanie Battaglini also feels that flexibility is essential. Part of her practice as a Christian is to pray and read scripture every day. But Battaglini’s work as a corporate vice president at a financial services company can be intense and demanding. To do her best work (and stay sane), she sometimes needs a moment away from her desk to reflect or say a quick prayer. Happily for her, the company’s culture allows her to take that time for herself to fulfill her spiritual needs.

This is not the only way that Battaglini’s employer has supported an aspect of her identity. Ten years ago, Battaglini came out as transgender at the same company where she works today. The supportive environment, alongside a strong nondiscrimination policy, made transitioning easier than it might have

been elsewhere. She echoes Fakhriyazdi’s sentiments about the importance of a supportive and inclusive work environment. Both women recognize that balancing their faith and work would have been more difficult with an employer that did not prioritize inclusiveness.

Battaglini is also a sought-after consultant, trainer, and speaker. As the founder and owner of Follow Your Heart LLC, she presents at Fortune 500 companies all over the world, sharing the story of her transition and advising others on how to support trans employees. Battaglini’s religious beliefs connect directly to her work with Follow Your Heart. “I really believe it’s a calling,” she says. “I believe God has blessed me with certain gifts.” Religion and spirituality are a big part of what inspired her to create Follow Your Heart, and what continues to drive that work today.

Battaglini was born and raised in the Catholic Church, and religion has always been a big part of her life. Today, she receives spiritual support from a nun whom she refers to simply as “Sister” and who works under the radar to support trans people of faith. Sister, Battaglini’s spiritual director since 2008, helps her balance her religious needs with her work, particularly by encouraging her to take the time she needs during the workday to reflect.

Battaglini has found that, in her professional life, her religious and gender identities rarely conflict. She suspects that a lot of this has to do with the companies she works for and with, all of whom support a culture of inclusion. As Battaglini says, “Context matters in everything—and culture creates that context in the workplace.” She knows that other trans people have been less fortunate in their places of work. “The biggest mistake you can make is not creating an environment where people feel like they’re being heard,” Battaglini says.

So what can companies do to make sure their employees, regardless of gender, are supported in their religious identity? All

the women agreed that flexibility and a culture of inclusion are key. When employees are able to have the freedom to take days off for observance and holidays and have flexibility in their schedules to take prayer breaks and honor religious commitments outside (and within) the workday, they are empowered to do their best work. The combination of institutional allowances for flexible scheduling and a culture where women feel comfortable asking for what they need is a powerful one.

Recognizing the unaffiliated

None of the women we interviewed are unaffiliated, but it is an important demographic, and companies must be mindful of employees who are unaffiliated. All the women in this piece identify with a religious tradition, but according to the Pew Research Center, 23 percent of Americans are unaffiliated, meaning that they are atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.”

Even employees who are unaffiliated may need accommodations. Some “unaffiliated” people, for example, may identify as spiritual but not religious and thus require days off for personal observances that do not coincide with a widely recognized religious holiday.

Finally, companies can foster inclusion by providing educational opportunities around this topic to employees. Weinstein acknowledged that this can be tricky because companies are “not always comfortable holding events, trainings, or sessions that are about religion,” even though they are crucial for raising awareness. The more that employees of all faiths and none know about how religious diversity comes up in the workplace, the more likely they will be able to contribute to an inclusive working environment. **DW**

Liz Joslin is an associate at the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding in New York. Tanenbaum is a secular, non-sectarian not-for-profit whose mission is to combat religious prejudice.