TANENBAUM

CORPORATE MEMBERSHIP

How to Talk About…What We Can't Talk About

Over the last several months, we've had questions from many of our clients about what they should be doing, given the current "state of affairs." While this phrase is vague, we know immediately what they mean: what should we being doing to make sure our Muslim employees are, and feel, safe? What should we be doing about the anti-Muslim rhetoric that keeps coming up in the media and circulates across social media? About the comments that are fueling fear and stereotypes?

> **"What should we be doing to make sure our Muslim employees are, and feel, safe?"**

It's difficult to answer these questions, in part, because it's difficult to ask them. Talking about religion in the workplace can be intimidating, because many still consider it a taboo topic. Talking about Islam and Muslims may feel even more difficult, especially at this sensitive moment. And yet, those conversations are taking place every day. The only question for employers is how to respond.

Being able to ask a question is the first step in working toward finding solutions. The volume of inquiries we have received on this topic shows that our Corporate Members are aware of the bias against Islam and Muslims that so many espouse. We know that you

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want to be proactive about assuring Muslim and Arab colleagues of the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion. This newsletter therefore offers some context, better practices, and resources to help you tackle this complicated issue at your company.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

You may have noted that the heated discussions about Islam tend to fluctuate depending on current events. As this newsletter is being written, the violence carried out in Brussels, claimed by ISIS, is leaving us heartbroken, even as it dominates the public dialogue and many of our private discussions. But whether the conversation about ISIS or Islamophobia dominates any particular news cycle is irrelevant for employers concerned with inclusion and talent management. Rather, they – you – need to recognize that anti-Muslim sentiment is a growing issue, that it is one that employees are likely to be discussing at work, and that it has to be managed.

Lately, there have been several instances of employees or customers having experiences of being discriminated against because they are or appear to be Muslim. For example, in early February, Sikh American actor Waris Ahluwalia was stopped by Aeroméxico staff and was asked to remove his turban for security reasons, even though other measures were in place that made this extra step unnecessary. The airline eventually apologized, and promised to work on cultural and religious sensitivity toward customers. Though Ahluwalia is Sikh, not Muslim, in the years since 9/11, the turban has come to symbolize religious extremism to some. The result is that Sikh men have often been targets of hate crimes, and that anti-Muslim sentiment is a problem for men and women who are perceived to be Muslim, not only for those who actually are Muslim.

In another case, Terry Ali, a receptionist at a dermatology practice in Michigan, was moved from her position at the front desk to the back of the office where she would be out of sight. The next week she was fired. Ali is a Muslim woman who wears a hijab, and her position change and eventual dismissal came shortly after the terrorist attacks in San Bernardino. Ali is suing her former employer for religious discrimination.[ii]

The Muslim community in the U.S. and globally is expanding, and this is relevant for businesses that want to be able to tap into the largest pools of customers and talent. The Muslim population in the U.S. is about 3.3 million as of 2015 (and is projected to double by 2050).[iii]

Globally, there are an estimated 1.6 billion Muslims in the world today, and the population is expected to increase 73% by 2050.[iv] Companies that want to ensure access to (and retention of) the Muslim community's premier talent should consider the importance of their reputation as a diversity-friendly and respectful environment. Specifically, is the company seen as "Islam-friendly"? Equally important, companies that want to stay competitive need to appeal to new markets. For example, we know that many of our clients are expanding business in the Middle East and other predominantly Muslim regions. Offering relevant services, such as sharia banking, may make a company more appealing to Muslim markets both here and abroad.

BETTER PRACTICES

When it comes to issues like anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia, many companies are wondering what they can actually do. The place to start is to ensure that Muslim employees feel safe and not harassed at work, by maintaining a culture where all employees are entitled to their beliefs as long as their behaviors are in concert with the company's core values of respect and inclusion.

Tanenbaum has a few better practices to suggest. The first is to take this moment and use it as an opportunity to recommit to Diversity & Inclusion. Consider using internal communications to let employees know that work is to be a safe place for all employees, no matter what identities they bring with them. Senior leadership may also consider a public message to communicate that they welcome customers and clients of all faiths and none.

You can also provide resources and encourage education among your employee populations. While we recommend that such conversations not be limited only to the challenges currently faced by your Muslim colleagues, we also recognize that anti-Muslim sentiment is a hot issue now. Below we therefore provide a number of resources that can be leveraged to have a safe and honest conversation about Islam in the workplace. We have grouped the resources by

suggested purpose in the workplace. Providing facts and a forum for conversation is a great opportunity to dispel myths and misinformation. Finally, as leaders in diversity and inclusion, we can bring the concept of "Upstander" into our corporate cultures. "Upstander" is a term we often hear in the context of bullying at school, but it is applicable to the workplace, too. We can make it part of our companies both by leading by example and acting as Upstanders in the workplace

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and by highlighting in corporate communications the "Upstanders" in our companies. Unfortunately, we all know that employees are sometimes ridiculed because of their religious affiliation (or lack thereof). Today, Because of the prominence of ISIS and anti-Muslim rhetoric in the media right now, our Muslim, Sikh, Arab and South Asian colleagues may be increasingly faced with such ridicule. If you overhear inappropriate comments directed toward Muslim colleagues, or inaccurate information about Islam at work, seize the opportunity to be an Upstander. Stand up and address the speaker with your experiences of Islam and the Muslim community. In doing so, you will be contributing to a safer and more respectful work environment for all.

These recommendations are broad reminders to be proactive. But we know that each company is different, and how they approach certain topics – including harassment and discrimination of Muslims and those perceived to be Muslims – will vary. Corporate Members can use consulting time to discuss customized strategies with the Workplace team, and use training credits and discounts to provide programming for virtual or in-person trainings on this topic.

RESOURCES

Conversation starters–consider using these resources to kick-start a discussion about anti-Muslim sentiment. Faith-based or other interested ERGs may use these resources for meetings or events.

- "Why Blame Victims Of Terror For The Evil Acts Of The Terrorists?" by Georgette Bennett (Huffington Post)
- "Yes, I Am Afraid" by Joyce Dubensky (Huffington Post)
- "The Corporate Climate: Making sure Muslims feel welcome" Tanenbaum blog)

Educational materials–consider posting these on internal platforms so that employees who want to learn more about Islam can do so easily. These resources could also be distributed alongside information about Muslim holidays (In 2016, Ramadan begins on June 6).

- Diversity in Islam Fact Sheet (Tanenbaum resource with questions for consideration)
- "Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world" (Pew Research Center Report)

Videos–these short videos can be a great way to engage employees in this topic. Show them during a training or presentation or use them as conversation starters for your team.

- "Identity in Islam" (a video clip by Average Mohamed)
- "American Muslims: Fact vs. Fiction" (a film by Unity Productions Foundation)

Human Resources–these new resources from the EEOC are particularly relevant from HR professionals.

- Questions and Answers for Employees: Workplace Rights of Employees Who Are, or Are Perceived to Be, Muslim or Middle Eastern
- Questions & Answers for Employers: Responsibilities Concerning the Employment of Individuals Who Are, or Are Perceived to Be, Muslim or Middle Eastern

i.   http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/25/fashion/waris-ahluwalia-back-in-new-york-turban-in-place.html?_r=0

ii.   http://michiganradio.org/post/muslim-woman-sues-former-workplace-discrimination#stream/0

iii.   http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/

iv.   http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/23/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group/

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COMBATING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE