

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Partners for a New Beginning

For many employees, religion is a personal topic, and one they feel uncomfortable discussing in their workplace. Simultaneously, managers may be unsure about how to discuss religious needs or to assess accommodations requests, often out of a concern that they will inadvertently cause offense.

Below are some communication strategies that can be useful for managers when these conversations arise:

I. BE CURIOUS + ASK RESPECTFULLY

Respectful curiosity is a valuable skill for managers in the workplace. As a manager, you are tasked with creating and maintaining a productive work environment – which means you need to be able to work effectively with the people who you manage. It helps to know: What makes them comfortable? What motivates them as individuals? Yet, managers are often hesitant to ask the important questions.

Harnessing your natural curiosity in a respectful way can help manage religious workplace tensions because coworkers and direct reports will know that they are being recognized. You can begin a conversation by acknowledging that you don't/can't know everything but genuinely want to learn.

There are ways to ask respectful questions. For example:

*You could ask, "I see that you usually cover your hair.
Is that part of the practice of your religion?"*

*"I noticed on the calendar that Ramadan is approaching.
Do you have any scheduling needs during that time?"*

By consciously asking in a respectful way without judgments, you will be modeling inclusive behavior for the people who report to you.

II. LISTEN ACTIVELY

Active listening involves several related skills. It involves hearing what is said, not simultaneously planning your response or critique of what is said, and trying to understand what is meant by what is said (after all, language is often imprecise). One technique that helps to assure you have heard properly is to restate or reflect back the most important thing that you heard the person say, or repeat the question they are asking but in your own words to be clear and to clarify.

“So, if I’m understanding you correctly, part of your observance is that you attend a longer set of prayers on Fridays. Is that correct?”

Keep in mind that if you are formulating a response in your head while the person is still speaking – you are no longer listening.

III. AVOID SPOKESPERSON SYNDROME – USE “I” LANGUAGE

No one can speak for an entire faith tradition. There is a huge variation in the way individuals may practice, even within the same faith tradition. Therefore, it is critical that each person speak from his/her own perspective about the practices or beliefs of their tradition. Encourage employees to inquire what another person practices (but not to ask what their religion practices or believes) and to speak from the first person, using the word “I” and not “we.” That is what we call “I” language.

IV. IDENTIFY & DEBUNK STEREOTYPES

Generalizations are a natural way to categorize and process the overwhelming amount of information we are bombarded with on a daily basis. Generalizations can provide a starting point to better understand and anticipate behavior. This natural process of breaking down new information into manageable categories is necessary and can be helpful, but can also be risky if misused.

Generalizations can be a useful way to explore religious and cultural beliefs. They provide a starting point based on what you know, what you think you know, on experiences with other people of the same religious tradition, or on what you’ve read in book or seen in the media. But they are only a starting point. To know that someone is Muslim does not tell you whether she is Sunni, Shia, or Sufi, whether she wears traditional dress, fasts during Ramadan or prays five times a day.

When generalizations devolve into stereotypes, i.e. fixed thinking where you no longer attempt to look beyond the initial assumptions and find out what is meaningful or true for a particular person, they often become damaging. Be aware of key words. When someone is speaking about a religion or a religious group of people and uses terms like “all”, “always”, “never”, “they,” and “those people” – you are likely to be in the presence of a stereotype. As the manager, you can interrupt and redirect the conversation.

V. FOCUS ON BEHAVIOR, NOT BELIEF

Remember that the goal of any conversation involving religion is to gain a deeper understanding of an employee’s beliefs and practices. It is not acceptable in a workplace to try to convince someone that his or her beliefs are wrong. Employees will believe whatever they want. Your company policy can only direct how individuals behave in the workplace and how they treat each other. Take the time to review all relevant company policies periodically, so that you are clear on the code of conduct expected from employees.

VI. ENCOURAGE LEARNING

Don't let limited training, experience or religious education inhibit you from addressing religion or facilitating these conversations. It's important for employees to feel that their religious beliefs and practices are respected and acknowledged. When you make a mistake (and gaffes are inevitable), sincerely apologize and move on. Reach out to the company's Diversity & Inclusion, Human Resources or Employee Relations group to support you in your efforts to communicate with your team around religious diversity. Take every opportunity to learn more about the variety of ways that religion can emerge in the workplace. And as you learn, identify and implement practices of respect and inclusion.