

Religious Icons and Symbols: A Guide for Workplaces

Icons and religious symbols are everywhere, including workplaces. And sometimes, icons and symbols trigger conflicts. That's why Tanenbaum identifies icons in our [10 Bias Danger Signs](#)—because they are among the most common ways religious bias and conflicts emerge at work. These are issues that face global and national companies, and their Human Resources, Employee Relations, and Diversity and Inclusion professionals. It can be challenging to determine whether a given symbol or icon is appropriate for the workplace. In a day when symbols and icons carry potent messages, it's important to be prepared to respond when such conflicts emerge.

What is an icon | symbol in the workplace?

In the context of the 10 Bias Danger Signs, Tanenbaum defines icons as religious or devotional objects (such as a holy book, quotes from scripture, or a statue of a deity) displayed in the workplace. Generally speaking, they can be, but are not necessarily, religious in nature. They may also serve as symbols that carry political or cultural meanings depending on who is displaying or responding to it.

For example, many associate the Nazi Swastika with the Nazi commitment to exterminate the entire Jewish population (as well as LGBT+ people, Gypsies, Catholics, and others). That symbol, however, has a different—and opposite—meaning as well. Still a sacred symbol for Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, the swastika SYMBOL is thousands of years old and connotes positive messages of “well-being” and “good fortune.”¹ So what does that symbol mean? It depends on who is using it or viewing it, and even when. In 1900, the Swastika was a symbol of goodness. A century later, for many, that is not always so clear.

The Confederate Flag and its meaning is certainly another subject of debate. Technically not a religious icon, it is associated with the South's secession to preserve the South as it was, to prioritize states' rights, and to secure slavery, an institution that was often justified by interpretations of Christian scripture at that time. Today, the symbol carries an association with racism, and is being used, along with the swastika, as a symbol of white supremacy and of a white America that does not include Jews, Blacks and others.

What should workplaces do, if an employee has these symbols on her license plate or posted in his workspace?

First Things First: Gather the Facts

To start, don't assume that the symbol—even given its significance in our current public debate—is being brought to the workplace with bad intentions. Get the facts.

In most cases, a question or conflict concerning an icon or religious symbol involves at least two parties: the employee who has the symbol displayed, and the employee who raises a concern about the symbol. It's important to talk to both parties. Find out why the person who complained did so (is it because they are offended by the symbol/icon? If so, why?). Ask the employee displaying the icon about its significance to them and why it's important to them to have it at work. Having these conversations will help you make an informed decision on how to proceed, while minimizing assumptions that may be incorrect.

Intent vs Impact?

Having an open conversation with the icon's displayer should provide insight into their intent (*why* they decided to display this particular icon at work). The conversation with the offended employee(s) should provide insight into the impact of the icon. It's important to understand the intent in order to make sure that the employee displaying the icon has a chance to give their side of the story, and to determine whether disciplinary action and/or coaching may be needed. If an employee displayed a particular icon with the intention of expressing views that are designed to make others feel unsafe or unwelcome, that is likely a violation of the company's code of conduct (creating a hostile work environment). That is markedly different from an employee who displayed a symbol unaware of the potential impact on others.

Understanding the impact of the symbol will help you determine whether it is appropriate for your workplace. If the complaint is based only on aesthetics, for example, it may not be necessary to take action. However, if the complaint is that it causes offense based on race, religion, gender identity, or any other identifier, it may warrant action of some kind—including outright removal.

Know your company policy

Find out whether or not your company has policies around icons and/or symbols in the workplace. Related policies may include dress codes and clean desk policies. These policies may provide guidance for these situations, and hopefully ensure consistent application throughout the company. In the wake of Charlottesville, some companies have implemented policies that ban images of the Confederate flag on company property.

ⁱ <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29644591>

<http://www.holocaust-trc.org/the-holocaust-education-program-resource-guide/the-swastika/>