TANENBAUM
COMBATING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE
Imagine…a more peaceful world that respects difference.
We are committed to making that vision a reality.

Workplace

Fact Sheet

Managers' Fact Sheet

"EXPERTS" NEED NOT APPLY

The topic of religion in the workplace can be daunting for those that assume it's necessary to understand the traditions, customs, and beliefs of all or most religions. Fortunately, that's not a requirement for effectively addressing religion and belief as a facet of diversity and inclusion. Mangers will, however, need a respectful curiosity and a sincere interest in learning. Remember, there's no one-size fits all solution.

DEFINITIONS:

There is sometimes a lack of clarity around the different terminology associated with religion and religious diversity. While some terms might be used interchangeably, it's important to note that the meanings of certain terms are actually very distinct and different from one another. To avoid confusion, the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding (Tanenbaum) offers the following definitions:

Religion: Human beings' relation to what they see as holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, or divine; Tanenbaum uses the term as a broad category.

Faith: Inner attitude, conviction, or trust relating humans to a higher entity or entities; of varying degrees of importance.

Spirituality: Focus on or interest in religious, moral, existential, or metaphysical questions; not always religiously connected.

"Unaffiliated:" People who identify as atheist, agnostic, or not of any particular religion; an increasing percentage of the population.

It is important to understand that these terms are interrelated but have different shades and connotations. Different people will have different understandings of these terms, which may not always align with these definitions.

ACCOMMODATIONS:

Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex or religion. As it relates to religion, Title VII applies to people who belong to traditional, organized religions as well as to those with sincerely held religious, ethical or moral beliefs. Employers must provide employees with "reasonable accommodations" unless to do so would create an "undue hardship" for the company. It should be noted that "undue hardship" is fact-specific. This applies to employers with 15 or more employees. There also exists a Ministerial Exception for religious institutions.
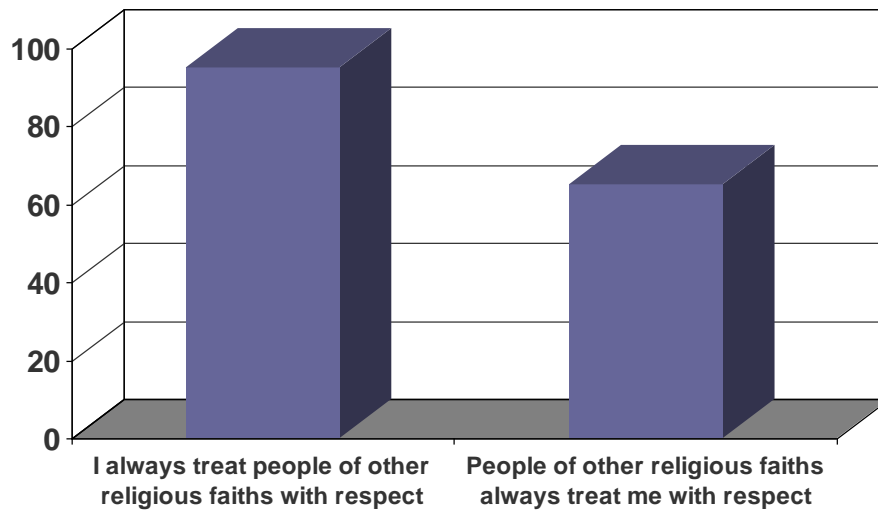
The above graphic illustrates the results of a 2004 Gallup Poll about religion and respect. An overwhelming 95% of people said they always treat people of different religions with respect. Only 65% of people, however, actually felt that people from other religions always treated them with respect.

Tanenbaum continues to consistently use it in trainings because, across demographics and geography, the results are always the same. Far more say they act respectfully than feel respected.

What causes this disconnect? How can it be that most people feel they treat people with respect, and yet don't have the experience of being respected in return? It's a reminder of a key rule of communications – what you intend to say or do is only half of the equation – what's equally important is how that communication is received.

Respect, then, can be understood not as merely tolerance, but rather an active engagement between people where each understands what is being offered as respectful behavior and responds in kind. In the exchange, people acknowledge and respond to the needs and requests of the other person with courtesy and a willingness to learn. With regards to religious diversity in the workplace, respect means being responsible both for behaviors believed to be respectful, and for the impact of those behaviors. The result of these kinds of interactions is better understanding and responses to the religious obligations of your colleagues.

TIPS FOR RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION

AVOID ASSUMPTIONS

When thinking about issues of diversity and interacting with colleagues, always check yourself by asking yourself questions: Am I missing any part of the picture? What do I *think* I know, and what do I *actually* know? Challenge those assumptions!

AVOID SPOKESPERSON SYNDROME

Use "I" language. Ensure that individuals speak from their own experience and not as the representative of an entire group. Be careful that you don't become a spokesperson yourself…

PLATINUM RULE

Treat others the way *they* would want to be treated. And the only way to know how respect "looks" to someone is to ask.

BE CURIOUS AND ASK RESPECTFULLY

Put your natural curiosity to good use. Often our fear of inadvertently offending someone can become a barrier to asking the necessary questions. You might say something like, "If you have a few minutes today, I'd love to learn more about your thoughts on _____." This kind of language communicates that you respect your colleagues and are open to understanding a new perspective.

LISTEN ACTIVELY

If you are mentally constructing what you are going to say next while a colleague is still speaking, that signifies that you have stopped listening actively.

DEBUNK STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes can be the worst culprit in creating conflicts and misunderstandings. If you hear key words such as "all," "always," "never," "them," and "those people."

ADDRESS BEHAVIOR, NOT BELIEF

All individuals are free to *believe* whatever it is that they believe. However, it's critical that all employees *behave* respectfully toward one another in the workplace.

ENCOURAGE LEARNING

Learn from every encounter, and use those insights to continue building your knowledge base.

ACKNOWLEDGE AND APOLOGIZE FOR MISTAKES

We have to acknowledge that given the breadth and depth of diversity, we're all going to make mistakes. But mistakes are important to make – you can learn from them and they provide an opportunity to deepen our understanding of one another – so long as they are dealt with properly. They must first be acknowledged and then you must then take ownership and genuinely apologize for the mistake made.

10 BIAS DANGER SIGNS

1. **ATTIRE** Employees are barred or discouraged from wearing facial hair, certain hairstyles, or garb – even if religiously motivated.

2. **DEVOTION** Employees encounter difficulties when requesting time off to pray, meditate, or reflect during the workday, or in locating a quiet, private space.

3. **DIET** Work-sponsored gatherings offer limited kosher/halal/vegetarian options.

4. **HOLIDAYS** Employees have a difficult time securing vacation/paid time off for their religious holidays or observances.

5. **ICONS** Religious icons or devotional objects are discouraged or barred from personal workspaces.

6. **NETWORKS** Determining whether to establish individual faith groups, an interfaith group, or no religious groups at all poses a challenge.

7. **PRAYER** Mandatory company meetings and celebrations include prayer.

8. **RIDICULE** Employees are mocked because of their religious beliefs, practices, or garb.

9. **SCHEDULING** Work shifts and meeting schedules disregard significant religious holidays.

10. **SOCIALIZING** Employees are labeled as anti-social when they don't attend company-sponsored parties for religious reasons.

THE BUSINESS CASE

Employees at companies that provide **flexible hours** for religious observance are more than **twice as likely** to say that they look forward to coming to work.

4-in-10 employees at companies **without clear processes** for handling employee complaints are **looking for a new job**, compared to 2-in-10 employees at companies with these processes.

When companies have **policies on religious discrimination**, their employees are less likely to be looking for a new job.

Regardless of a company's size, workers whose companies offer **education programs** about religious diversity and **flexibility** for religious practice **report higher job satisfaction** than workers in companies that do not.

ACCOMMODATION MINDSET

The "Accommodation Mindset," a term used by Tanenbaum to illustrate the process of accommodating a diverse workforce, is a starting point in shifting attitude towards diversity initiatives. Managers who have a more complete understanding of the benefits that come from diversity initiatives can begin to approach the incidents and conflicts that arise in their diverse employee populations as opportunities to create a more comfortable work environment for your employees. The full Accommodation Mindset resource can be found here.

For more useful information on world religions, subscribe to Tanenbaum's online resource, Religion at Work: A (Human) Resource. Visit the Tanenbaum Workplace Resources page for additional Tanenbaum Fact Sheets or contact Tanenbaum at workplacediversity@tanenbaum.org with questions.