

Eight Steps to the Accommodation Mindset

What is the 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 attitudes towards diversity initiatives.

Managers who have more complete understandings of the benefits associated with diversity initiatives can begin to approach identity-related incidents and conflicts as opportunities to create more inclusive work environments for their employees.

Such an approach opens the door to move beyond accommodating your workforce, and can help organizations (and individuals) proactively manage accommodation requests.

The Eight Steps to the Accommodation Mindset

1. Get the Facts

When preparing to address a specific accommodation request, it is important to begin the review process by gathering the relevant facts. This includes researching your organization’s policies and practices. Understand how those policies and practices are articulated and how employees access that information.

It is also necessary to come prepared to discuss diverse religious traditions and practices. It will be important to lean on trusted sources and well-vetted resources. Always remember that this process is just a starting place for learning more about the individuals’ beliefs and practices. Allow room for nuance, recognizing the diversity both across and within traditions. Never allow your experiences to devolve into stereotypes.

2. Recognize All Employees’ Needs

Tanenbaum’s 2013 Survey of American Workers and Religion, a representative survey of over 2,000 American workers, found that that the accommodation mindset can be important to people of all faiths and none

- One-third of respondents saw or personally experienced incidents of religious bias in their workplaces.
- Half of non-Christians say that their employers are ignoring their religious needs.

- Nearly 6-in-10 atheists believe that people look down on their beliefs, as do nearly one-third of white evangelical Protestants and non-Christian religious workers.

All employees, regardless of how they identify, may require an accommodation of some kind. It is important to understand that there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution. Never dismiss an employees’ complaint or request and always address the needs of individual employees (not groups of employees).

3. Ask Respectful Questions

Providing religious accommodations is a two-way street in which employees and employers work together to find practical and sustainable solutions. In the best-case scenario, employees will provide a manager or employer with information about:

- their sincerely held religious, ethical, or moral beliefs
- the conflict in question
- the specific request.

Not all employees, however, are comfortable enough to fully discuss their circumstances and/or needs. It is the job of the employer to ask respectful questions in order to find out more about an employee’s practices and beliefs in order to identify a reasonable accommodation that meets the needs of all parties.

4. Identify Any Limitations

Job-specific functions and requirements can complicate the reviews and approvals of religious accommodation requests. Employees sometimes belong to small departments or work in roles that require 24/7 service. It is also possible that an employee is requesting something that would impose an undue hardship on an organization. Factors relevant to undue hardship may include the type of workplace, the nature of the employee’s duties, the identifiable cost of the accommodation in relation to the size and operating cost of the organization, and the number of employees who will in fact need a particular accommodation.

Costs to be considered include not only direct monetary costs but also the burden on the conduct of the employer’s business. Even if it is believed that an accommodation would create an undue hardship, do not deny a religious accommodation request without first collaborating with all necessary offices (Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI), Human Resources, Employee Relations, Equal Employment Opportunity, and/or Legal Departments) and exploring all other options.

5. Be Creative

When an employee requests a religious accommodation, it is important to think creatively about how both the needs of the employee and the needs of the organization can be met. Not only is it likely that a compromise can be found, but even if a compromise isn’t possible, it is important to demonstrate a good faith effort to accommodate.

Below is an example of a successful religious accommodation.

A situation arose at a large hi-tech firm shortly after September 11, 2001 in which the security department insisted a new Muslim employee remove her hijab (veil) for her photo ID key card. She insisted that her religious belief prohibited her from appearing unveiled before non-familial men. Management deliberated and came up with a solution. The new employee was given two ID cards – one veiled and one unveiled. Her unveiled photo was taken and processed by a woman. The unveiled photo card would not be shown or used for entry purposes. The veiled photo card was programmed to unlock doors and shown for ID purposes as she moved around the facility.

This religious accommodation was successful in part because managers approached the situation with openness and creativity.

6. Communicate

The existence of written non-discrimination policies on religion, in itself, reduces the perception of bias in the workplace and improves employee satisfaction. But the implementation of those written non-discrimination policies covering religion, religious expression, and religious accommodation is just as important. Communicate those policies to all employees and evenly enforce them.

7. Educate

Tensions often arise around religious differences due to a lack of information or the presence of misinformation. Be prepared to provide employees with educational resources on diverse religious traditions. Check out Tanenbaum's [Workplace Resources](#) page to explore and share Holiday Fact Sheets, Competencies for Respectful Communication, and much more.

8. Institutionalize

Managers, human resource practitioners, and employees alike often identify practical and creative solutions for meeting the needs of diverse workforces. All too often, however, successful religious accommodations are not recorded and shared institutionally. Employees and managers are left needing to solve the same problems time and again. This often results in unnecessary frustration, time lost, and even money wasted.

Tracking both religious accommodation requests and the subsequent outcomes of such requests can provide critical insight into the needs of an organization's general employee population. Such insights can inform new or updated policies and practices that ultimately create more inclusive workplaces for all employees.