The December Dilemma

The December Dilemma is that time of year where multiple holidays collide and people with good intentions can find themselves in the middle of potentially toxic misunderstandings. This phenomenon occurs in workplaces across America and can also have an impact on global workplaces. Below are some tips that can help create an inclusive workplace during this holiday season.

December Dilemma Holidays

Many holidays take place throughout the fall and winter. Since many holidays fall on different dates each year, it's important to refer to interfaith calendars like the Anti-Defamation League's: https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/calendar-of-observances

Some holidays that may fall in or around December include:

- **Eid al-Fitr**, a celebration that marks the end of Ramadan in the Muslim faith. The Eid has shifting dates, and although it has fallen over the summer during recent years (in 2026, it will be from sundown on **March 19th** to sundown on **March 20th**), it can fall much later in the calendar and is therefore a holiday to consider in thinking about the December Dilemma as the date shifts.

- **Diwali**, the Hindu Festival of Lights. This celebration usually falls in October or November. In 2026, Diwali will fall on **November 8th.**

- **Bodhi Day**, a Buddhist holiday celebrating Siddhartha Gautama's (the Buddha's) realization and presentation to his fellow seekers of the Four Noble Truths. Bodhi Day is traditionally celebrated on the 8th day of the 12th lunar month. In 2026, this will be on **December 8th**.

- **Hanukkah**, the Jewish Festival of Lights. This eight-day holiday can fall in late November, December, or occasionally early January. In 2026, Hanukkah will be observed from sunset on **December 4th** to nightfall on **December 12th**.

- **Christmas**, the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the central figure of Christianity. Christmas is celebrated on **December 25th** by Christians who use the Gregorian calendar. Christians using the Julian calendar—many of whom are Eastern Orthodox Christians—celebrate Christmas on December 25th on the Julian calendar, which translates into **January 7th** on the Gregorian calendar.

- **Kwanzaa**, a week-long secular holiday honoring African American heritage. This holiday is observed from **December 26th** through **January 1st** each year by some African Americans in the United States.

- **The Lunar New Year**, a traditional Chinese holiday marking the end of winter that falls sometime during January or February. In 2026, it begins on **February 17th**. The Lunar New Year is an East and Southeast Asian celebration. In China, it is known as the "Spring Festival."

- **Yule**, a Wiccan or Pagan celebration of the Winter Solstice, beginning (in the northern hemisphere) on **December 21st, 2026**. Yule celebrates the rebirth of the sun, the beginning of the time when the days will become longer, and welcomes the bounty of spring.

The December Dilemma Checklist

Review your Policies: Review your company's religion in the workplace policies to be clear on what is acceptable and not acceptable during the December holiday season.

Be Curious and Ask Respectful Questions: The holidays are an excellent time to raise awareness around religious diversity in your office, so don't be afraid to ask respectful questions of your coworkers. For instance, it is appropriate to ask a coworker what holiday greeting they prefer or if they have any holiday practices to be aware of, as long as the questions are respectful and come from a place of genuine curiosity. Asking your colleague, a question is one of the best ways to avoid misunderstandings and make sure that everyone feels included and respected during the holiday season.

Avoid Scheduling Mishaps: During this time of year, it is particularly important to make sure you're not scheduling an important meeting or special event on a holiday. Remember that holidays such as Hanukkah and Ramadan occur at different times each year. Use interfaith calendars, like the Anti-Defamation League's mentioned above, as a reference while you're scheduling meetings, or for more information about an unfamiliar religious tradition.

Diet: Whether you're planning an office celebration, or bringing in end-of-year treats, it's important to think about all of your colleagues. Send a note or email to find out about your colleagues' dietary needs and be mindful of the significance of religious dietary restrictions. Your colleagues themselves are the best source of information about their personal needs (but not the needs of others). Remember that each individual practices differently, and that religious practices change and fluctuate over time.

Learn New Phrases: Learn about the different December holidays, their practices and significance. Honor the differences with *appropriate greetings for your co-workers*. Going this extra step sends an important message that they are valued. Below, we've included some of the many examples of appropriate greetings for you to refer to:

- "Eid Mubarak," the Arabic greeting meaning "Blessed Eid"
- "Happy Diwali"
- "Happy Hanukkah"

- "Merry Christmas"
- "Habari Gani?" which is "What's the news?" in Swahili, the language used for Kwanzaa greetings. The response will be the name of that day – "Nia" for example.
- Numerous greetings are used to wish people well during the Lunar New Year, such as "Happy New Year"
- If you aren't sure what holiday, if any, your colleague or client celebrates, you can use a more general greeting such as "Happy holidays" or "Have a good year end"

Celebrate Inclusion: Planning holiday parties and celebrations can be stressful and difficult. If you are involved in the planning process, remember to make them as inclusive as possible, and re-evaluate any long-standing traditions. For instance, instead of hosting a "Secret Santa," try offering a 'Grab Bag' instead. And if your office chooses to put up holiday decorations, accompany those decorations with appropriate educational materials that address the significance of the holiday. It's also a good idea to start new traditions, like acknowledging holidays that fall outside of December, sending fall or winter cards to clients and co-workers, or doing a charity project together.

Remember that not everyone celebrates holidays, and some observe holidays with cultural or family traditions rather than religious ones. According to PRRI, about 27% of the U.S. population is unaffiliated, meaning they are agnostic, atheist, or 'nothing in particular.' While many unaffiliated people celebrate Christmas and other holidays in a secular way, some may not celebrate at all.

Additionally, some people who are religious, like Jehovah's Witnesses, do not celebrate holidays. Considering the enormous diversity within and among traditions, you are always better off avoiding assumptions when it comes to the 'holiday season' (and all year round!)

For more useful information on world religions and traditions, subscribe to Tanenbaum's online resource, Religion at Work: A (Human) Resource. Visit the Tanenbaum Workplace Resources page for additional Tanenbaum fact sheets and contact Tanenbaum at membership@tanenbaum.org.