

Faith in the workplace: Step carefully

During the month of December, do you think about black Friday shopping? Baking cookies with your neighbors and sharing the baked goods with the office? Lighting your menorah? Hanging lights and decorations in the office? For some, it might come as a time of reflection and a time to share your blessings with others.

As an employer or manager of employees how do you take each of your individual employees' religious practices into consideration when planning holiday parties or end-of-the-year festivities? As our world becomes more globally diverse, conflict over employees' religious differences should be expected to increase — and not just during the month of December. The topic is greater than asking wondering if you should wish everyone a Merry Christmas or a Happy Holiday. Clearly the month of December is upon us, but religious beliefs carry over into many more topics such as sexual orientation, health plans covering birth control and dress codes. There are strategies that can support employees, employers and managers. This article will outline how you can help minimize conflict and increase understanding.

First, let's take a look at the regulations supporting employee's religious beliefs and gain an understanding of what you need to know as an employer. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the EEOC, is responsible for enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person's race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employers from discriminating against individuals because of their religion in hiring, firing, and other terms and conditions of employment.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: You don't give up.”

Anne Lamott



Sarah Sommers

The act also requires employers to reasonably accommodate the religious practices of an employee or prospective employee, unless to do so would create an undue hardship for the employer. A reasonable religious accommodation is any adjustment to the work environment that will allow the employee to practice his/her religion. Flexible scheduling, voluntary substitutions or swaps, job reassignments and lateral transfers are a few examples of accommodations that may apply to an employee's religious beliefs (www.eeoc.gov). Ignorance of the law is not an acceptable argument and certainly not an excuse. Understand the regulations and consult an human resources professional or an attorney if you do not understand the regulation or are not clear on how to apply it to your particular circumstances.

Establishing policies and practices that are respectful of all religious beliefs and accommodating individual employee requests when possible help create an environment of open communication and lay the framework for managers to work within. The key is to not avoid religion in the workplace. Employees have reported that they are happier, retention is higher and companies are more likely to attract the best talent when addressing these issues head on. Professionals “recommend a faith-friendly approach that shows an employer respects all employees' faith traditions, including atheism” (HR Magazine, December 2013). These policies can be clearly articulated in your employee handbook that each employee signs off on. Managers then have the responsibility of creating a religious-friendly environment. Reminding employees of religious policies and practices is as important. Sharing the policies for requesting time off, attending religious events, reminding employees of the procedure for requesting an accommodation or seeking support if they feel their rights have been violated, will go far in creating a positive working environment and avoiding legal issues that can be both costly and time consuming. Clear communication is key.

Here's a December real-life situation as an example. Your holiday party was a success, or so you thought. You learn

after the fact that one employee made a religiously offensive comment to another coworker. This coworker is now coming to you requesting that some sort of disciplinary action be taken. What do you do? Given that you did not witness the offensive comment, you are left with investigating the situation and providing follow up with each of the employees. Employees should be reminded that the company is not requesting them to change their values or beliefs, but that it is more important to focus on behaviors. Creating an all-inclusive environment can be challenging, however ignoring it could create more conflict or resentment.

Here's another example. Healthcare reform mandates employers with more than 50 fulltime equivalents provide healthcare coverage. All plans are now required to cover birth control as a minimum standard, however your company doesn't support birth control measures. Do you have to comply with this law? Recently a judge sided with a Colorado-based company citing that the company did not have to provide contraception to their employees through their insurance plan based on a violation of religious beliefs. The judge noted that this ruling applied only to this particular company. I think we are going to see more and more companies file such lawsuits as we begin to implement more healthcare reform laws.

Often companies create certain legal challenges for themselves because they were not aware of certain religious holidays or beliefs. Most situations that arise in this area are done unintentionally and without malice. Taking the time to understand your employees' beliefs and background can go a long way in avoiding any misunderstandings.

As we all wrap up this year's holiday festivities and look forward to planning events in 2014, take a moment to consider the many religious holidays that take place throughout the year. As a nation we truly are a melting pot and our labor pool is very diverse. With that diversity comes an opportunity to educate ourselves on the many cultural and religious beliefs that may be present in our own employee population. It's an opportunity to create an environment that is compliant, supportive and productive.

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