

Building a Little Piece of Heaven at Work

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Early in my career, I remember reading an article which proclaimed that religion was one of the topics you should never discuss at work. Yet, nearly two decades ago, the first faith-based employee resource group (ERG) was officially recognized as part of the diversity network at Texas Instruments (TI). And today we have three faith-based groups that often work in partnership and collaborate together.

We started building a little piece of heaven on earth when the first faith-based ERG was formed at TI. Some may be surprised that faith would be embraced in a global high-tech corporation, yet TI has a diverse workforce representing a wide range of worldviews, and – for many employees – faith forms the foundation of their core values and self-identity. My experience has confirmed that if we foster a corporate culture that allows religion to be discussed, instead of that culture of openness steering us into icebergs, our culture actually helps us avoid the icebergs and better navigate our corporate journey.

Not long after inaugurating our faith-based groups, I remember walking out of a conference room where I had attended a roundtable discussion hosted by our Christian ERG. About twenty attendees had joined together to share their ideas about how faith inspires their workplace behavior. I was amazed that I'd been spiritually uplifted in a corporate conference room. For me, religious identity is the most important component of my personal identity, and that modest roundtable discussion had tapped into my core identity and recharged me.

A similar experience happened a couple years ago when I joined Jewish co-workers inside a sukkah that had been constructed on TI property to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. That morning, I had dealt with the stress of trying to solve a customer issue on a tight time schedule. In spite of that high priority task, I carved out time to participate in the Sukkot lunch gathering. As a result, I was able to listen to a rabbi tell a heart-warming story about two men who had shared a private Sukkot celebration in a time when religious observance was a risky proposition. I walked out of that lunch refreshed and ready to get back to work.

As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who lives in the state of Texas, I belong to a denomination that makes up only about 1% of the local population. Consequently, almost all of the people I associate with in TI's faith-based ERG's come from a different religious denomination, if not a different religion. Some of my best friendships in life were formed with Evangelical, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim co-workers in a workplace that supports bringing your full self to work.

Over the years, we've had the opportunity to organize a variety of inspiring events in the workplace. Some of our best-attended events have involved inviting Holocaust survivors to share their life experiences with TI employees. Feedback from attendees demonstrated that not only did the historic opportunity to hear from Holocaust survivors attract a large number of people, but the people who did come walked away with life-changing insights.

Personally, I can never forget shaking hands with William Schiff, a man who was taller than I am and who had been reduced to 69 pounds by the time he was liberated from a concentration camp at the end of World War II. The story of what he endured is a reminder that we must all be willing to stand up for one another to make sure that experiences like his are never repeated. And the fact that he lived long enough after his liberation to hold his great-grandson tells something about the power of the human spirit in overcoming adversity.

Marty, a member of my direct work team at the time that William and his wife spoke at TI, found out about our faith-based groups because of that event. He talked with me about why the Holocaust speakers were so important to him, and – as a result of that conversation – we shifted from just being co-workers to becoming good friends. Over the years, we have prayed together, in settings including Christian prayer meetings and Jewish funeral and synagogue services, and we have talked about things that are core to each of us as religious believers. Becoming friends with Marty – as well as with many others I've met through our corporate diversity network – has widened the circle of people I can count on for help with workplace issues. And, at the same time, those relationships have also enriched my life.

The year after hosting our first Holocaust speakers, TI's Christian and Jewish groups partnered with our LGBTQ group for an exhibit about the persecution of homosexuals in Nazi Germany at the Dallas Holocaust Museum. A few years later, our Jewish, Christian, Muslim, LGBTQ, and special needs ERG's all partnered together to co-sponsor another Holocaust survivor speaking at TI. The broad sponsorship of these events, the strong attendance, and the remarkable feedback we received from attendees showed that religious-themed events can, indeed, resonate broadly.

We've been privileged to host many other remarkable events at TI, including: interfaith panel discussions; visits to places of worship (in which we go on different days to Christian churches, Islamic mosques, and Jewish synagogues where co-workers worship); COVID-19 prayer gatherings; mentoring programs; service projects and fundraisers; Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, and Passover events; a dialog between an Evangelical pastor and a Latter-day Saint professor who had shared a long-term friendship; and a gathering of support held after the El Paso shooting.

On the work day after the El Paso shooting, our corporate diversity director reached out to the chair of our Hispanic ERG and asked if something should be done to help employees deal with that tragedy. The Hispanic chair had already been fielding calls from multiple employees that morning, and he decided to reach out to Marty, who had previously helped coordinate a similar event. That same week we held the gathering of support, with the Hispanic chair, our diversity director, and company executives speaking at the event. Prayers were offered by a Jewish rabbi, by a representative of the Muslim ERG, and by me (as a representative of the Christian ERG). It was a very sobering event and reinforced for me that what might be perceived as affecting one group affects us all and that there is power in all of us coming together. The solidarity displayed during the gathering of support has been typical of my experience in corporate diversity. We have found that – when we are willing to embrace faith in the workplace as part of the overall corporate diversity equation – we are drawn together rather than being driven apart, and we are able to build bridges of solidarity that have spanned across the breadth of the diverse worldviews represented in our corporation.

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I'll close with a simple experience to illustrate why I think we have created a piece of heaven on earth with our faith-based ERG's. One day, during a corporate diversity fair, I was involved in a discussion with a Jew and a Muslim, and I remember thinking after that discussion that if a Muslim, a Jew, and a Christian can have a spontaneous friendly discussion about religion, our faith-based networks were succeeding.

At TI, we have been able to build interfaith friendships in a workplace environment that encourages us to work hand-in-hand toward corporate goals. Contrary to the advice to avoid religion in the workplace, we have found that by embracing religion within the corporate environment, we have built friendships, enriched our lives, and tapped into the most powerful force of motivation for religious believers. And we have hopefully created a better place within our corner of the world.