

Sparking the Flame of a Faith Community at Work

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Dan Eckstein is a Director in Accenture's Communications, Media and Technology practice and is based in NYC. Dan focuses on bringing innovation and new ideas to internet and hyper-growth companies based in the NY area. He is also passionate about Inclusion and Diversity and is on a mission to make Accenture the most truly human organization in the digital age while ensuring that every employee can have a feeling of belonging. He is the global lead of the Jewish Employee Resource group and the Interfaith Employee Resource group lead in NY Metro.

As an observant Jew, I've always been passionate about inclusion and diversity, especially the topic of one's faith at work. After graduating college, it was a challenge to figure out how I wanted to balance my religion and my work. I found myself trying to compartmentalize my work life from my religious life. But it didn't feel right. I asked my parents, grandparents and mentors for advice. I'll never forget the story of my Grandpa when he arrived in NY after the Holocaust and surviving the Auschwitz concentration camp. He was a fur matcher and he told me that almost every Friday in the winter he would leave work early to get home for the Sabbath by sundown. When Monday came around, he would go back to work and they would fire him for leaving early. As a survivor, my Grandpa taught me to always be proud of who I am and to stand up for my beliefs.

I ultimately decided to wear my Kippa to work because I wanted to be transparent about who I am and be consistent both inside and outside the office. I feel it represents my true self and is something that I'm proud of. As a leader, I also hope that I am a role model to others, encouraging authenticity.

I learned about the Interfaith ERG shortly after joining Accenture and found a small group people who were thirsty for engagement and dialogue. The ERG started over a decade ago as a bible study for a group of Christian employees. Since that time it has grown into an Interfaith group with seven different religions represented, 900 members and over 150 virtual and in-person events!

I decided to step up and lead the group locally in New York. Partnering with my colleague at the time, Elan Kogutt, along with the leaders of our six other Faith ERGs, we work together as volunteers to try different things with the hope to engage and excite the NY Metro community. I decided that we needed to be scrappy, we would only be able to learn if we tried.

We focus on a wide variety of educational topics – from Interfaith Marriage, to LGBTQ and Faith, to discussions led by local faith leaders. We host events to explore our respective religions – through Sabbath meals, Ramadan Iftar meals, Diwali celebrations and prayer breakfasts. We plan purely social outings and participate in corporate citizenship activities together. Working with our HR team we have been able to ensure that religious accommodations are built into our policies and that each employee feels empowered to request what they need. One of those special events I'd like to highlight and share a little more about was our Building Bridges session.

At Accenture we started our "Building Bridges" journey in the midst of racial unrest in the U.S. in 2016. Our Interfaith ERG hosted a Building Bridges session on August 11 of that year where over 100 people packed into the NY office training room to talk about faith at work. We decided to anchor this session

Faith@Work Matters (DRAFT | not for circulation)

around the theme of “story telling.” Everyone has a story, but we’re often so busy or distracted at work that we don’t take time to ask or share.

One individual talked about his mother’s religious background. He knew she grew up observant in her faith but never heard much about her past and what it was like growing up. That led him to have misconceptions about that religion. During our session, he met someone from that religion and he said this filled a huge gap in his personal life and helped him learn more about who he is.

Another story was from a manager whose Muslim employee left work each Friday between 12-2pm, never talking about where he was going and leading the client to wonder where the employee was. It was through this session that the manager, who was Jewish, learned about the Muslim prayer on Friday and approached his colleague to talk about his own personal faith, and leaving early for work because of the Sabbath. This transparency and dialogue helped to strengthen their relationship and will help the manager be more confident in discussing this with his client.

We ended our session by asking local faith leaders – Rev. Doyeon Park, Brahmachari Karuna, Rabbi Larry Sernovitz, Mohammed Al-Mathil and Rabbi Bob Kaplan – to reflect on the day and offer messages around hope, transparency, courage and community. Mohammed Al-Mathil encouraged us to ask questions from a place of respect and to do a bit of homework when coming to conversations about religion. Brahmachari Karuna shared a story of his father, a Human Resources leader, who seeks to find points of beauty in other religions, which helps to spark conversations with colleagues to explore commonalities and points of beauty across their different faiths.

To cap off an already great day, the Jewish Employee Resource Group hosted a Sabbath Dinner that evening for people of all faiths (employees and their guests) at a local Kosher steakhouse. Nearly half who attended had never experienced a traditional Sabbath meal. We said blessings over the bread and wine, sang traditional songs and our Jewish members explained each of the prayers. It was a night of celebration, learning and certainly bridge building.

Afterward, many shared what a special evening it was. One email I received was from an employee and her guest that said “You made us feel so welcome and never out of place. You can feel the warmth of employees and leadership...it’s like one big family.” Perhaps the comment that sticks with me the most was from a Rabbi of a synagogue in Maryland who was having dinner at the restaurant and observed Accenture’s gathering. He came up to me as he was leaving and shared that he has never seen a company host an event like we did on Friday night. He was impressed with how engaged our employees were -- by volunteering to explain the parts of the meal and how open others were, to learning about the practices of another religion. It was truly a night to remember. I feel so fortunate to work at Accenture where we have the encouragement and support to organize these “out of box” opportunities.

As I reflect, it is amazing that what started as a support network and spread by word of mouth is now an official ERG which is pulled in as a resource by our senior leadership, in good and bad times. I’m proud that we’re able to be open about religion and use it as a tool to connect more deeply with each other. As Ellyn Shook, our CHRO said “By opening up about religion and having a dialogue about it at work, we take positive steps forward to appreciate our differences, celebrate our commonalities, and ultimately build stronger relationships with each other – as colleagues and human beings.”