

Faith is Coming Out of the Closet

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Allowing employees to share their deepest, faith-based purpose at work creates a work environment that allows them to come to work as their whole self.

This benefits the workplace by allowing for great diversity and removes fear.

As an ordained minister who also has provided coaching to hundreds of business entrepreneurs, I've discovered that American business has created a nice big closet for people of faith. I know something about closets as I've also been a leader in the battle for equality for gay Americans in the 1990s.

The workplace has made huge strides for LGBT employees but is increasingly making people of faith believe they need to go into a closet when it comes to sharing their faith. It doesn't have to be this way.

I understand why businesses get nervous allowing faith-based language into the workplace. As numerous business leaders have shared with me, "I'm afraid when you open up the whole religion thing my employees will start evangelizing people. Will they condemn people of other faiths or no faith?" They have mostly concluded that the smartest thing to do was keep a wall of separation between work and faith by warning employees to leave their beliefs at home.

Diversity training programs have followed this path as well. If a person wants to come out as gay or speak about their ethnic heritage that should be embraced, however, employees are often told that if they want to hang a cross or star of David or the crescent moon in their office because it could offend other employees traumatized by their interaction with religion.

This isn't easy work, but true diversity work means creating spaces for people with different worldviews who still respect others. It doesn't mean favoring one diverse viewpoint over others.

I work at a firm where I lead practice in social impact investing. A few years back, Tom Raffa, the CEO of Raffa Marcum of the firm was asked if the firm would host a discussion where employees spoke about their faith and the role it played in their work life. Tom Raffa, who isn't traditionally religious, also made it his mission to have the most diverse firm possible. And, he and his wife, were successful in creating the largest accounting firm in America that is majority women owned with over forty languages spoken among his employees. An early champion on welcoming gays in the workplace, he was also proud to do the accounting for prominent Catholic, Jewish, and other diverse faith organizations.

Rather than play it safe and react to fear, he asked how he could make it happen. Knowing that I was a minister, he asked me to help in the planning. Once it was clear to all involved that this was not an event to proselytize, we planned a luncheon.

The turnout was much larger than expected and HR leader facilitated the lunch by asking people to share their own faith path and how it impacted their work. What happened next was one of the most beautiful couple of hours I've experienced in the business. Employees shared how their faith was the driving force behind their life, family, and work. They noted that this luncheon gave them permission to bring all of

themselves to work. The diversity of the group represented the firm's beautiful diversity. A Latter-day Saint member shared as did a Hindu employee. We soon learned that most attendees were "non-denominational." This title meant different things to different employees.

The common theme was that people of different faiths chose this particular firm to work at because it did social good.

Another theme mentioned over lunch in follow up discussions was how many times people of faith feel they need to remain in the spiritual "closet" at work. They cannot share that which drives their life. This luncheon, sanctioned by the firm, provided a space to be themselves.

The conversation was so lively at lunch that I never got a word in edgewise, which, for a preacher says a lot. The high point of that discussion came from a woman in the firm that shared a beautiful story. She announced that each day when she started work she picked ten photographs on the website of employees to pray for. She also prayed for safety and success for the firm. I'm still touched today by her words. When I shared this story with Tom Raffa, he was meaningfully touched.

Creating a more inclusive work environment for people of faith isn't just good for creating happy employees. We discovered it actually helps with sales.

Our team discovered that when potential clients learn that I'm a minister, the energy in the room changes. Very often the client explains in deeply personal detail their own deeply spiritual catalyst for starting their business or nonprofit. They too can come out. Meeting someone who can understand that motivation and not mock or laugh at it can build a far deeper connection with clients.

Our rising secular workplace culture is making it difficult for people of faith to come to work as their whole self. By providing a space that respects all diversity, including diversity of faith, businesses can tap into a deep reservoir of goodwill that benefits everyone.