

Searching For and Finding My Voice

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Have you ever been in a kindergarten classroom and observed how kids are ready to jump out of their chairs in excitement when the teacher asks a question? They raise their hands even before the teacher is done speaking and want to shout out the answer, yearning for attention.

My wife is an early childhood educator, who did her teaching practicums in the Philadelphia inner city schools while attending graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. Visiting her classroom to read to her kids has always been a rewarding experience, but observing their behavior is even more intriguing. While the majority of kids are screaming, 'Me, me, pick me!' to any question you ask them, there are a few who are eerily silent, glued to their seats. 'Why,' I asked my wife, 'Do those kids not know the answers?' After all, the questions I asked were rather simple. 'They really do,' she replied, 'but they just haven't found their voice.' I was curious if they all would eventually find their voices.

It was shortly after 9/11, while I was sitting in my cube at work, that I overheard a hallway conversation between two coworkers. They were talking about Muslims in a derogatory way and using stereotypical characterizations to demean Islam. I so much wanted to stand up and confront them and point out the inaccuracies in their statements, what Islam really is, and what Muslims stand for, yet I found myself frozen in my chair, unable to say anything.

I had no voice.

Whenever I encountered either of the two coworkers, I found myself turning away and completely avoiding them. It was good that they were not part of my immediate group. I hate to think of how excruciatingly difficult it would have been if I had to work directly with them.

Anytime an employee faces a hostile environment at work, it inevitably leads to diminished productivity. And the longer this persists, the costs to both the employee and the employer keep adding up. Retention rates drop as valuable employees find themselves with no choice but to leave.

In a 2001 pre-9/11 survey of Muslim employees conducted by the Tanenbaum Center, 77% had some sort of religious bias concerns at work, and 45% considered quitting as a result – with 50% having seen their productivity suffer. In the years since then, these numbers have gone down and up based on the political winds that blow through the country.

For a long while, employers have recognized that creating an inclusive work environment is necessary to improve productivity and foster growth. But most of the time this has been limited to gender and race, with faith being ignored, often because it is perceived as a divisive force.

Yet, for so many of us, our faith is the single most important defining characteristic of who we are. For a Muslim, the drive and motivation towards excellence in all that we do is based on a command given by

God in the Quran. It is this God-conscious lifestyle that forms the backbone of our commitment to a sense of ethics, regardless of the situation. These are values that are fundamental for any employee to succeed in their work environment.

This is not to say that those who aren't religious, aren't ethical, or that those that are religious, are always ethical—I have known many secular people who demonstrate the highest sense of ethics and likewise many perceived religious folks who act contrary to their faith. Rather, the point is that for many of us, faith is the factor that drives us in everything we do.

So what would happen if I had to check-out my faith every morning when I got to work?

Fortunately, I have never had to do that because my work environment has always welcomed inclusivity and championed diversity. Yet, in the aftermath of overhearing that derogatory conversation about Islam and Muslims, I realized that I was subtly checking my faith out.

It was a little before this incident that my employer started embracing Faith-Based Diversity Initiatives (Employee Resource Groups) to add to the already vibrant diversity scene, which was largely gender and ethnocentric based. I remember attending an introductory presentation on this given by an attorney who worked in the corporate legal department and was advocating on the establishment of a Judeo-Christian Values Initiative. I was rather taken aback because at that point, I didn't see a place for such a group in corporate America.

And of all people, I told myself, an attorney should know better.

In the post-9/11 climate, someone in the larger group at work circulated an email that lashed out not just at Muslims but at others who looked differently and dressed differently. When I read that email, my heart sank with the realization that hate against one set of people can easily lead to hostility against everyone else who is perceived as being different. One doesn't have to go far in history to see examples of this slippery slope of hate. That email led to a deluge of replies, and that same day the instigator of the email was dismissed. Corporate America was at its best showing zero tolerance towards any hostility at work.

However, the problem is that subtle hostility does more harm to the work environment than open biases, for the latter is easy to address through policy and procedures, while the former may emanate from misconceptions and stereotypes that are hard to detect and counter.

But how can you address subtle stereotypes about faith in the workplace? Stereotypes which, for the most part, are cultivated through lack of information as opposed to sheer hate? You just don't have the voice to walk up to everyone and say 'Hi, I am a Muslim and I would like to tell you what I really believe and that most of what you probably know about us from the media is wrong and doesn't represent what we really stand for...' But, if there was an avenue that would allow us to organize ourselves and work together with people of various faiths and diverse backgrounds, we could openly interact with others and show who we are without any fear.

Perhaps that attorney was right after all.

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Not long afterwards, the Muslim Employees Initiative was born, joining the wider Diversity Network and feeding off of the existing energy to build an inclusive work environment for all. Suddenly, a support network opened up, facilitating friendships across lines in ways we may never have imagined. Joint activities and projects were initiated, allowing for us to share our faith and learn from each other while giving back to the community through partnerships with the annual United Way, Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation campaign and Take Your Daughters and Sons to Work Day, to mention a few. Group presentations were set up, allowing us to explain what Islam really is, what Muslims believe, and the workplace issues that Muslim employees face. We organized visits to synagogues, churches and mosques and invited clergy from these three faiths to share their thoughts on topics of common concern in the workplace.

The momentum has been so powerful that when Muslim summer interns come, they are so impressed with the inclusive work environment, that they want to come back full time. One top-notch intern made the mistake of joining a competitor, but after a short spell there, promptly made his way back—faith-based diversity was now a competitive advantage.

Over time, other corporations and organizations began to warm themselves to faith in the workplace, and we were asked to present our diversity journey to a Dallas Human Resources conference. I remember it so vividly, because the day before I was in San Jose presenting a paper at a technical conference and had to catch a red eye on the fifth anniversary of 9/11 to make it back to Dallas. It was a joint presentation that I was doing together with none other than that attorney, who was representing the Christian Values Initiative, and who by now was a good friend of mine. I followed his presentation, and you would have thought we had rehearsed the whole thing for how smoothly our points blended with each other's—even though we had zero coordination. As I began, I cleared my throat and addressed the audience, 'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am from the Muslim Employees Initiative at Texas Instruments, and I would like to tell you about...'

I had finally found my voice.

And I remain hopeful for all those who are yet to find theirs.