

The Power of Faith Inclusion

Sue Warnke

Sue Warnke is Senior Director of Content Experience at Salesforce and President of Faithforce San Francisco at Salesforce.

“If you could have two extra hours in the day, what would you do with them?”

This was the question posed at a team event at work a few years ago, just months after I had converted to Christianity. A group of about ten of us sat around a conference table taking turns sharing our answers.

“I would read more,” one shared. And others: “I would sleep,” “I would plan a trip,” “I would take cooking lessons.” As my turn approached, my heart began to race. Would I have the courage to say what was really on my mind?

As a recently converted Christian, what I craved more than anything was time to learn about my new faith. “Read the Bible, Read the Bible” pounded in my head as the only possible answer to this question. But I was scared. I hadn’t told my colleagues about my conversion yet. What would they think of me? Was I even allowed to mention the Bible at work?

Three more people to go. Then two. Then one. Then me. This was my moment, my chance to come out of hiding, to be my authentic self and stand tall in my new faith. You can do it, Sue, I told myself. I took a deep breath and said:

“I would go hiking....”

And in those four words, my heart dropped. I had failed -- myself and my faith. It was heartbreaking. I began to question my place at this company. Maybe I don’t belong here, I thought. Maybe I *can’t* bring my full self to work. Maybe I should just hide my faith. My morale and motivation plummeted.

But before giving up, I decided to slowly, carefully, ask others about faith. To my shock, I wasn’t alone. It turns out that employees all across the company were wondering the same thing: Is it okay to talk about faith at work?

It got me thinking -- what if we didn’t have to waste our energy wondering? What if faith could be treated like any other type of identity and be acknowledged, normalized, and even (one day) celebrated?

The Birth of Faithforce

I began to search for faith in my company’s social network. Quickly I discovered that two amazing trailblazers had already started the process of creating a brand-new employee resource group: Faithforce. A Muslim woman in Chicago, Farah Siddiqui, and a Christian man in Australia, Michael Roberts, were in the very process of founding Salesforce’s first-ever interfaith employee resource group.

They let me jump on board, and a couple months later in 2017, Faithforce launched: Salesforce’s tenth employee resource group. I took on the role of President of Faithforce San Francisco. About 60 people joined that first kickoff even where we had a chance to explain what Faithforce IS and ISN’T. I always like to start with the latter.

What Faithforce isn't:

- **Proselytizing:** We don't try to change others' beliefs
- **Political:** We don't take official stances on political topics
- **Argumentative:** We don't debate theology
- **Homogenizing:** We don't merge faiths into one, but rather honor the distinctions of different faiths and worldviews.

What Faithforce is:

- **Educational:** We learn about different traditions
- **Philanthropic:** We give back to our communities (10,000 hours volunteer hours last year alone)
- **Celebratory:** We celebrate each other's holidays

And to our shock, Faithforce membership exploded, becoming the fastest-growing employee resource group in Salesforce's history. We now have nearly 3000 members and 17 regional hubs all around the world, from Mexico and Brazil to Australia, New York, and London, and all across the United States.

Impacting Morale

This story summarizes the need for faith inclusion best for me.

An engineer (I'll call him Khalid) was looking tired in a meeting. After the meeting, his manager (I'll call him Francis) pulled him aside and asked if he was okay. Khalid looked down and slowly mumbled under his breath: "I'm fasting...for Ramadan."

Francis said something very important in that moment. He said: "Oh! Tell me more about that." Khalid looked up, shocked that for the first time in his career somebody was interested in this thing that he thought he had to hide.

"Well," he continued, his voice gaining confidence, "I'm fasting from sun-up to sun-down for a month. The purpose is to gain compassion for those in need."

Francis was blown away. He had heard about Ramadan but never understood it. Faithforce hadn't launched yet, so Francis wasn't sure whether he could talk about faith. But his instincts told him to ask one more question. It was a question that had a profound impact on Khalid. And it's the question that's at the heart of Faithforce and its rapid growth.

Francis asked: "How can I support you?"

Never in Khalid's career had anyone shown an interest in his faith, let alone offered to support him in it. Khalid had always been in hiding, searching for rooms to pray in, hoping nobody would walk in or notice his fatigue during Ramadan. Francis and Khalid worked out a slight adjustment to a couple meetings to accommodate his prayer schedule, and Francis even encouraged Khalid to teach the team about Ramadan.

Khalid felt twice as productive. He began telling others about his manager, posting about Salesforce on social media. He tells the world about this company that means it when they say, "Bring your whole authentic self to work." Khalid was more productive that month of Ramadan when he knew he didn't have

Faith@Work Matters (DRAFT | not for circulation)

to hide, when he felt cared about, when he felt that the most important thing in his life -- his faith -- was honored, recognized, and even celebrated.

The following year, after Faithforce launched, Salesforce held an Eid celebration at the end of Ramadan. Khalid invited his entire team. They invited others. Employees came by the hundreds to experience this Salesforce Eid celebration: To learn, to eat, to get henna tattoos, and to be allies to the Muslim community. There were many tears at that first-ever Muslim celebration at Salesforce, including mine. Seeing Muslims feel validated by a company that loved them made me feel validated in my faith. There wasn't a doubt in my mind: we were stronger together.

Impacting Recruiting

Employees began to post about the Eid event externally. A Salesforce intern wrote a LinkedIn article about how much that celebration meant to him. Thousands read that article, including a man (I'll call him Asad) who was working at a major competitor of Salesforce where he didn't feel supported to pray or talk about his faith. When he finished that article, he made a decision. Come what may, one day he would work at Salesforce.

A few months later, I was happily handing out Faithforce flyers at a new hire fair when a man came running from across the large ballroom toward me, shouting "Faithforce!"

"Yes?" I said smiling in surprise.

Asad introduced himself and said, "Faithforce is why I am here." He told me about how he had to hide his faith at his last company and how Faithforce was the reason he quit his job and started at Salesforce. Asad is now a top engineer, innovating for our company and bringing in new perspectives. And by the way, he has recruited others.

That made me realize that acknowledging faith as an aspect of diversity is not just a nice thing to do for individuals. It's not just the kind thing to do for society. It's the right thing to do for the business: a recruitment and retention tool, a morale and productivity booster, a sales and innovation enhancer. It may be one of the biggest business boosters around.

Impacting Mental Health

Faithforce was exploding -- filled with beautiful educational, philanthropic, and celebratory events. But then something happened that shook many employees to their core. On October 27, 2018, a shooter killed eleven worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

Faithforce leaders met and realized we needed to do something. I was nervous -- I had never organized a vigil before. Could you even do that at a company? Several of us quickly pitched the event to Equality leaders, got the green light, and began planning Salesforce's first vigil.

A local Rabbi joined, along with hundreds of employees, as we lit candles for the victims and learned about Jewish mourning rituals. In the last five minutes of the vigil, a call came in from an employee. In tears, he shared that his cousin was one of the victims of that shooting. Another cousin survived by hiding in the boiler room. "Thank you for giving my family a voice," he said. Dozens shared that this was one of the most healing things they'd ever experienced.

Faith@Work Matters (DRAFT | not for circulation)

We held another vigil just months later in the wake of attacks on Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, and then again after attacks on Christians Sri Lanka and Sikhs in Afghanistan. Seeing what this meant to the different communities always brought tears to my eyes.

Like everything else, we wrote about these vigils on LinkedIn. And again, I received a message from a woman at another company, a stranger, who said: "I went to work after the Christchurch attacks. My company said nothing. My colleagues said nothing. And I was in mourning. One day I will work at Salesforce."

There is no denying it: Acknowledging the most important parts of our employees has a profound impact on their mental health, especially in times of tragedy. It allows work to be a place of healing and support and shows prospective employees what kind of company you truly are at heart.

Impacting Customers

It's not just potential hires who seek belonging. Faith-based customers and prospects are also watching to see if companies acknowledge the most important parts of who *they* are. At Dreamforce 2019 -- the biggest technology conference in the world -- Salesforce offered a prayer and meditation space as well as kosher, Halal, and vegetarian food.

As customers joined employees for prayer during various advertised prayer gatherings, they were blown away to know that faith was truly honored at Salesforce. I was blown away to receive an email from an executive at one of these companies -- a major Christian ministry -- who said that praying with Salesforce employees built so much trust at their company that they would be increasing their investment in our services.

I was so honored that something as seemingly small as praying with a customer could have such a huge impact on the bottom line.

Impacting the World

Faith at work is not just good for the business, but it's good for the world.

This was never more apparent than during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. Salesforce partnered with a local synagogue in San Francisco to build a hand-made Sukkah (or hut) in the Salesforce park. It was the first-ever official sukkah in a public space in the city and was open to anyone. Thousands came to see it, learn about Sukkot, break bread together, and even pray.

The entire city united in what came to be known as #Sukkahforce. It was a joyous experience that brought unity, not division, a moving event that destigmatized faith at work and brought community, education, and celebration.

Being able to bring my whole self to work has had a ripple effect throughout my life, making me want to learn about others, celebrate with them, and give back. And all of that drives productivity, morale, innovation, recruitment, retention, innovation, and even sales. It brings healing and belonging. It brings validation. I want to tell the whole world: When implemented properly, faith at work is not only *not* divisive, but it may be the very antidote to divisiveness.