

## Forming Community from Diverse Worldviews

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When I moved to New York City from Texas, I initially struggled to form a sense of community. At work, this feeling of isolation changed when I went to a Jewish Employee Resource Group (ERG) event and spent an evening with fellow Jews enjoying *Fiddler on the Roof* on Broadway and eating Kosher pizza.

After the event I was struck with the thought: I'd love to do this again, but with other worldview communities. Accenture has such a diverse workforce -- how special would it be if we could share these experiences with people beyond our own worldview?

My colleague Dan Eckstein had the same thought. A few short weeks later, we hosted a panel event titled "Dating, Dining, and Devotion." The premise for the event was simple: share your worldview's practices as they relate to romance, food and dietary laws, and prayer and meditation.

One moment stuck out for me at that event. There was a situation where a Muslim analyst whose manager had previously complained that he consistently missed important meetings. His manager, who was Jewish, was at the event and learned that the analyst missed meetings because he was attending Jumu'ah prayer. The manager realized they had a shared connection as religiously observant colleagues. If we create a workplace where faith is welcomed to be openly discussed, these types of misunderstandings need not occur.

That was almost four years ago. Since then, at Accenture, I and other interfaith leaders have facilitated 40+ interfaith events, created the first religious literacy and accommodation training initiatives and developed a national initiative to represent worldviews equitably and teach faith accommodation.

It became evident to me then, and it is clear to me now: you do not need to be religious or spiritual yourself to value religious literacy or understand the interconnected nature of faith and other areas of life. People of all identities should be empowered to participate in building an inclusive work environment. At that very first event, we created a space for our fledgling community to experience that.

After that first event we decided to host a "Building Bridges" session, a platform Accenture established so we can have open and honest discussions about the issues of religion and race. During the conversation, we leaned on the power of stories to share how faith affects us, our colleagues and clients, our family and friends, and our communities. That event proved to be one of the most authentic experiences in my career. People wanted to share their experiences and emotions with their coworkers but had never been given the platform. One community member spoke about the ignorance they face as an Atheist amongst peers. We worked with him to establish an Atheist and Non-Believer ERG so that people who shared this identity could share community as well.

## Faith@Work Matters (DRAFT | not for circulation)

At the end of that event, we asked a few pointed questions to the audience. *Raise your hand if you're familiar with the faith practices of colleagues that impact the workday. Raise your hand if you're aware of the laws that govern and protect religious freedom in the US.* In a room of 100+ people, just a few raised their hands. This lack of knowledge is prevalent at workplaces, and can lead to miscommunication, tension, and conflict among teams.

According to Pew Research, religious and philosophical diversity is growing in the US and around the world. This trend has the potential to create deep divides and tension in our local and global communities as people divide into groups of "us versus them." But with education and awareness, we can build strong social ties. Doing so is critical to the success of our workplaces and communities.

Our journey to improve religious literacy and accommodation has taken us to new and exciting places. We partnered with the Religious Freedom Center and Religious Freedom and Business Foundation to help train 25+ executives, who became our practitioners on the ground to get more teams thinking and talking about faith in the workplace. After growing the NYC Interfaith ERG community from 150 to 750 people with Dan over two years, I stepped into a national role on our Interfaith ERG team to spearhead educational programs, including a religious literacy initiative at Accenture.

We first trained our human resources functions, so that there would not be dissonance between what we say and what we do. We worked with our Employee Relations department and had meaningful discussions - with marketing, HR, recruiting, workplace, business relations - on religious accommodation and related legal frameworks.

In this training we used real-life case studies applicable to the workplace. Our goal was to foster two core skills: empathic capacity and an accommodation mindset. Empathic capacity enables people to respond to an issue even if they may not face it personally, and an accommodation mindset empowers people to pursue solutions that create an open and understanding space for employees. We participated in honest, tough conversations about what it takes to accommodate our employees of every worldview.

In recent years we have seen xenophobia, anti-semitism, racism, and prejudice surge in the U.S. As a Jew I experience this, and I hear about my Muslim and Sikh peers' experiences as our communities face rising persecution. The most important way to combat this tide of ignorance is to build strong bridges between people. We must tell our stories and histories to inspire genuine allyship and change.

In our community, we widened the umbrella to be inclusive. By forming an Atheist community, organizing events with Christian and Muslim organizations about LGBTQ+ issues, and bringing awareness to and celebrating holidays across worldview communities, we are having open conversations where people of all worldviews come together. We host interfaith workshops centered on storytelling and conflict negotiation, discussions about hate and discrimination in the wake of attacks and shootings, and trainings on religious literacy. Through these initiatives, we are accelerating a culture of equality for all, fostering understanding, acceptance, and community at Accenture.