How to Welcome Faith-Oriented Diversity & Communications in the Workplace

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OVERVIEW (see full video of Kent's comments)

Companies are increasingly intrigued or concerned about the growing emphasis on religious diversity at work. Increasingly, company leaders are realizing that, for many employees, it is their faith, more than any other single factor, that defines their core identity.

When corporate culture constrains them from referring to their faith at work, they feel devalued, and forced "under cover." They feel they can't "be themselves." They can become alienated from their work. Yet, many business leaders have no idea how to approach the topic of faith and belief in the workplace. They wonder: What are the best practices in this area? What are pitfalls to avoid? What can/should be done?

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM & BUSINESS FOUNDATION
FAITH & BUSINESS BUILD A BETTER WORLD

1. Faith and belief should be part of a larger emphasis on valuing ALL individuals for who they are.
2. Consider how freedom of religion and belief dovetails with your business priorities.
3. Clearly define your intentions – <u>why</u> you're doing this.
4. Begin at the "grassroots."
5. Persuade your leaders. Don't force it.
6. Document a vision.
7. Define reasonable processes.
8. Help people of various faiths equip their own constituents.
9. Seek expert advice.

The following are the edited speaking notes from Kent Johnson's November 2020 presentation to companies with or interested in having faith-orient Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):

More and more companies are wrestling with the growing emphasis on religious diversity at work. Company leaders are realizing that, for many employees, it's their faith, more than any other factor, that defines their core identity.

Yet at many companies, faith and spirituality aren't considered appropriate topics of conversation. People feel constrained from connecting their faith to their work. They feel they can't "be themselves." They can become alienated from their work. They often feel unsafe. The message between the lines seems to be that their faith is something to be ashamed of. And sometimes, they feel they can only relate deeply with those who are "like them."

There's a deep yearning today for AUTHENTICITY. Sincerity. Mutual trust. Deeper connections. In that vein, there's lots of discussion about the need to engage the whole person at work. We hear about psychological safety. About the need to listen to one another. About overcoming biases – conscious and unconscious – that keep us from building stronger relationships with one another.

All these topics are closely related to people's faith and beliefs. Yet, many business leaders have no idea how to approach the topic of faith in the workplace. It feels scary. They wonder: What are the best practices in this area? What are pitfalls to avoid? What can/should be done?

Misunderstandings and unfounded fears constrain progress in this area. For instance:
- People of faith worry that, if they were to tell others about what forms the core of their identity, they'd be subjected to criticism and rejection - they worry that they'd be labeled as narrow-minded, or superstitious, or intolerant, or something worse
- Then there's the fact that insensitive and unkind expressions of faith can offend people who don't share those beliefs. Some people have had bad experiences with so-called "organized religion… and they're apprehensive.
- And there are misunderstandings about the legal requirements
  - When does religious expression cross the line and create an oppressive environment?
  - When do restrictions on religious expression violate people's religious freedom?

These are all valid concerns. But in our experience, they can be easily addressed. What's holding companies back is not these problems, but a lack of information and lack of coaching in this field.

Today I have nine coaching points for companies interested in constructively opening the door to religious expression and making things better:

1. Faith and belief should be part of a larger emphasis on valuing all individuals for who they are

It is important that from the outset of any "what if" management discussions about a possible focus on religious diversity to make clear that religious equity and inclusion would be part of a larger emphasis on valuing all individuals for who they are. The *big idea* is that the right to "be yourself" at work extends to people of all faiths and beliefs, including to atheists.

A corollary to this principle is that faith-oriented communication will always be entirely voluntary. It's up to the individual. This sounds simple, but it's hugely important, right at the beginning.

2. Consider how freedom of religion and belief dovetails with your business priorities.

Here are two examples:

PayPal issued a statement when it launched its interfaith Employee Resource Group called "Believe." The statement includes this:

> "We believe all employees have the right to bring their whole self to work. Faith and worldviews are core to who we are – our values and beliefs – and to how we conduct business."

> It goes on: "The mission of Believe is to foster an inclusive work culture and to promote holistic wellbeing by providing a forum to openly exercise and celebrate all faiths and worldviews while working. Believe exists to create awareness and understanding of faith, hope, love, empathy, respect for one another and service toward our customers, communities and co-workers."

Texas Instruments' faith-oriented diversity initiatives have the same purposes as the company's other diversity groups:
1. Too promote a collaborative and respectful culture,
2. To recruit and cultivate talent,
3. To stimulate innovation and engagement, and
4. To give back to their communities, "believing that stronger companies create stronger communities and stronger communities build stronger companies."

The focus on religious diversity should be seen as part of a bigger objective. This is not about an isolated "hobby horse" project. It's not about stocking the freezer with chocolate ice cream because many employees like that flavor. This is at the core of your company's passion for its most valuable asset: its *people*.

This is not just about what's happening in our companies. In focusing on religious diversity at work, we're building a culture of civility that has "legs." Our companies are producing cultural

byproducts that impact the world outside their workplaces. People are learning how to connect more respectfully and civilly as they work side by side. In a world wracked with bias, tribalism and distrust, this matters.

3. Clearly define your intentions why you're doing this

Those advocating for workplace religious equity and inclusion should explain why they're enabling religious expression at work. There shouldn't be any hidden motives. In addition to the business cases just mentioned, many companies express purposes like these:

1. To support company values like personal integrity, goodwill; employee well-being; and psychological and spiritual wellness
2. To foster bridge-building across cultures.
    a. Keep in mind that this is not just about making religious people comfortable; it's also about fostering cross-cultural relationships
    b. This bridge-building goes beyond mere "tolerance" - see more on moving beyond tolerance at [Covenantal Pluralism & Business](#)
3. It's also important to explain what this focus on faith and belief is NOT.
    a. This is *NOT* a "Trojan Horse," designed to enable a particular group to dominate.
    b. And we're *NOT* pushing employees to say that all beliefs are equal. Diversity isn't about making everyone alike! We've got to create a culture that enables diverse employees to engage, to learn deeply about one another, to remain true to their core beliefs, and to disagree civilly.

4. Begin at the "grassroots."

Often, this focus on spiritual identity starts with informal, unofficial, grassroots events that emerge spontaneously from your employees.

If you think there's no grassroots interest in faith expression, the silence of your workers on this topic may well be caused by an impression that your culture would frown on any discussion of faith at work. You'll probably be surprised to learn that behind-the-scenes religious and spiritual "skunkworks" are already underway in your companies.

It's far better to have this going on out in the open than to have it take place in the shadows, as if it's something to be ashamed of.

The grassroots are important. Don't misunderstand: There's certainly a lot that top management can do to nurture this movement toward authenticity. Business leaders and faith leaders can officially free people to engage openly with anyone who is interested to learn about their core identity and beliefs. That's great.

But the enduring and most impactful work of building trust and civility takes place outside the C-suite - in thousands upon thousands of personal interactions - characterized by a humble desire to learn about one another's ultimate "why." The grassroots is where this transformative change happens. So, get in touch with it!

5. Persuade your leaders. Don't force it.

It's often counterproductive to try to force leaders to permit religious expression by citing the minimum legal requirement of "reasonable accommodation" for religions, or by threatening disciplinary actions. Compulsion in this area can lead managers to "check the box" by doing the bare minimum to meet the requirement.

It's far more effective when leaders are persuaded of the benefits of religious expression, and genuinely advocate it.

So, how do persuade your leaders? Use real-life, personal examples, preferably firsthand accounts of bridge building and what that's meant to coworkers - at your company or elsewhere. Real life, personal experiences are transformative. We've got a lot of stories like this. Seeing people's lives transformed by this movement is why I've devoted my life after Texas Instruments to this cause.

I've seen Muslims, Christians and Jews and Buddhists joining together as one to help communities torn by sectarian violence. I've heard from people of various faiths who joined the company, or stayed, because they felt the company *cared* about them enough to let them live out their faith openly. Then there are tales of friendships across sectarian lines. Example: The enduring friendship of the late Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia. These are transformative.

6. Document a vision.

Document a vision of what it would look like, day to day, to openly enable and encourage employees to integrate spirituality into their work. Include specific proposals, not just generalities. Some suggestions:
1. Joint outreach activities among faith-oriented ERGs to the community (such as tutoring, food for poor, outreach in times of crisis).
2. A unified multifaith voice on topics of commonality, supporting, for instance, the rights of those who are under-appreciated, regardless of their religion or belief system - or race, or status – or sexual orientation, or spot on the org chart.
3. Educational programs concerning relevant faith doctrines that are shared by many established faiths. For example:
    a. Integrity/ethics, truth telling, forgiveness, compassion. One faith-oriented group focuses on what they call "Integriosity" – blending both integrity and generosity.
    b. The "golden rule" – treating others the way you'd want to be treated

c. A high view of the value of all human beings
d. Principles of humility and openness to listen to constructive criticism –especially from people who are not like us
e. Holiday observances; including the rationale/history behind significant days on various religious calendars. This is not trivial

7. Define reasonable processes.

Before officially embracing religion as a component of your company's larger diversity focus, follow a defined initial decision-making process to help management weigh the issues and make appropriate plans.

1. Consult people/groups that have experience in this arena, and who have done this well.
2. Consult internal company stakeholders. Encourage them to raise questions and concerns early in the process.
3. Look specifically for leaders who might be apprehensive about religious expression. Don't bypass them! Urge them to meet regularly with those who are advocates, to build relationships with one another as they wrestle with this.
4. Many people have had bad experiences with "organized religion." They've been hurt, felt put down and condemned. It's crucial to listen to them, and to be careful not to offend.
5. This vetting process is crucial. It isn't necessarily easy. Among other benefits, it serves as a demonstration of the *need for* a focus on religious diversity. It also serves as a demonstration of the *feasibility of* a focus on religious diversity. When people of different beliefs and perspectives come out the other side in unison with a proposal, that is transformative!
6. Then there's processes governing internal communications. You need to carefully craft internal communications about the idea; especially when announcing a new policy or approach or diversity emphasis. Don't just announce that your company is launching a new "faith-friendly" program. That can be misinterpreted as "open season" on so-called unbelievers.
7. Provide for ongoing executive sponsorship and guidance. This is not to police and restrict. Executive sponsorship reinforces the fact that this is an important strategic effort for the good of the company

8. Help people of various faiths equip their own constituents to interact well when communicating about spiritual matters at work.

Don't impose thought police; help them coach their own. Among other things, encourage them to be careful about religious jargon. The work should be done "in the open." Secrecy can lead to unwarranted suspicions about ulterior motives.

9. Finally, seek expert advice.

Look for guidance to companies and experts that have done this well. The Religious Freedom & Business Foundation (RFBF) has collected voices from across corporate America - voices of people of many faiths and backgrounds in our conferences and through our surveys.

Our speakers – many of them senior executives - describe why this is important, including in a collection of conference proceedings and essays. From them, we have identified "The Faith and Business Movement: 10 Principles Defining its Success in Corporations." The principles are:
1. It's organic, not just a program
2. It's good for business
3. It's a mosaic focused on service
4. It enhances overall diversity
5. It's more than just ERGs, it includes chaplains at over 1000 companies
6. It's humbly coming out of the closet, inclusive of all, cutting across all other diversity categories
7. It adds ethical resources
8. It promotes authenticity
9. It's good for our health, as science shows
10. It will not go away:
    a. Religion is one of the few social institutions that accompanies people from cradle to grave. It marks rites of passage in youth, such as baptisms and bar/bat mitzvahs, and it is present in last rites and (in most religions) the hope of resurrection – that all is not done at death.
    b. To be competitive in today's and tomorrow's marketplaces, companies need to set this force for good free by including religion as a full-fledged part of their diversity, equity and inclusion commitments.
    c. Companies that don't will hurt their competitiveness and will stifle the spiritual lives of their employees.

By helping to shape our workplace cultures in these ways, we can break down those walls. We can see reconciliation and civility. Our companies need this.

And the world needs this. We hope many of you will be bold catalysts for this kind of change, by championing freedom of religion and belief at work.