Time was tight and I hope this information provides you with a greater capability to respond to this dimension of diversity. Situations involving religion are very powerful and can be more challenging.

Here are the real life scenarios regarding religious and cultural diversity in the workplace and the talking points to debrief each case. Assumptions are a common way to make sense out of unfamiliar, confusing or chaotic situations. When you rely on your assumptions, it’s easy to go about your business "as usual" without having to think differently.

Here are some scenarios that you may face as managers in hopes of making you more comfortable with this topic.

When you're in a situation with employees of different religions, remember an employee should be clear when explaining why an accommodation is needed. Vague references to culture, heritage or personal preferences are not the same as clearly stating that one’s actions are required by religious belief. It's also essential that you remember that you're dealing with work and the focus on business and the impact on productivity – will help maintain perspective as you work through the issues.

Remember the duty of reasonable accommodation appears in Title VII’s definition of religion:

The term “religion” includes all aspects of religious observance and practice, as well as belief, unless an employer demonstrates that he is unable to reasonably accommodate to an employee’s or prospective employee’s religious observance or practice without undue hardship on the conduct of the employer’s business.

Once an employee has made an accommodation request, the employer cannot ignore the request and initiate a good faith discuss with the employee.

Some Recommended Resources:

1. http://religions.pewforum.org/maps
2. www.PluralismProject.org
3. www.TeachingTolerance.org
4. www.Beliefnet.com
5. www.20000dialogues.org

Thank you for your interest in this very important topic!

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1. Party Pooper
A work group completes a project, meeting a big deadline, and the manager invites everyone to a celebration after work on Friday. People are delighted - except Philip, who is an Orthodox Jew. Rather than say anything about Friday night being his Sabbath, Philip just doesn’t show up. The manager assumed that Friday evening is a time for going out and that everyone could attend. Philip assumed that his manager wouldn't understand his religious observance, or even worse, didn't care. When Philip didn't attend, his manager concluded that he wasn't a team player. His co-workers assumed he was a snob.

Key Issue
Schedule considerations regarding workplace related events outside of usual hours and schedule that conflicts with personal or religious obligations.

Implication
In a diverse work environment, recognition and affirmation of a work group’s efforts on behalf of the company is important. However, showing consideration of each team member’s personal or religious requirements is important when scheduling events outside of standard work hours.

What manager should do?
1. EXPRESS recognition of your team’s hard work and outstanding efforts to complete the project.
2. ACKNOWLEDGE various responsibilities and availability of everyone.
3. ASK the team or offer BEST TIMES for everyone. It reflects your recognition and inclusion of everyone on the team.
4. Ask the team how they wish to celebrate as a team.

2. The Case of the Canon Law Dispute
A Catholic employee requested a full day of leave for his observance of Good Friday. Although not all Christians – and not all Catholics – observe Good Friday as a full-day religious holiday, the need to take the day off to observe was part of this employee's sincere and long-standing practice.

The employer allowed him to take four hours of his annual leave but refused to allow him to take the whole day off, contending that Canon law required no more than two hours of attendance at mass on Good Friday.

Key Issue
Defining ‘Holiday” and accommodating holiday requests.

Implication
Recognition of the various holidays, scheduling and accommodation of requests for religious observances.
What should a manager do?

Requesting a holiday for religious purposes that are observed is at the employees’ discretion.

1. **CONSIDER TO RETAIN** fixed days off for times when the company is shut down.
2. **ATTEMPT** flexibility by replacing some fixed holidays, perhaps President’s Day, with two or three floating holidays at the discretion of each employee (over 70% of the DiversityInc top companies for diversity offer floating holidays).
3. **COMBINE** sick days, vacation days, and holidays into a new, comprehensive category for time off, called “personal time off.”

Managers should be aware of relevant laws and company policies. Within that framework, they need to remember that each employee is different. In this case, an internal alarm should have gone off when the manager heard that the employee wanted more than the standard amount of time off for Good Friday.

At that point, a manager should be asking him or herself:

- Do I have a legal obligation to meet this employee’s needs?
- If I don’t have a legal obligation, should I still accommodate this employee’s legitimate request for reasons of trust building and motivation?
- In balancing the interests of the employee and the organization, is an accommodation the right thing to do?

Those questions should lead the manager to the right answer, which, in this case, is “Yes, you can take the entire day off as personal leave.” However, always remember to consult HR for assistance and consultation.
3. The Case of the Happy Birthday Song
At your company, you have a long-standing tradition of remembering and celebrating birthdays. It entails not only that the employee on their birthday receive a special lunch, but also a cake and everyone sings Happy Birthday. This year you have a new member on the team. She insists she does not want a birthday celebration, but also she is not comfortable singing Happy Birthday. At first, no one takes it seriously and then, she is dismissed by comments like “What’s the big deal? There’s no harm in some food, song and cake.” On the employee’s birthday she calls in sick and doesn’t come to work. Feelings of confusion, anger and resentment is felt amongst the team towards this employee.

1. RECOGNIZE traditions may not BE received same way.
2. INSPIRE OF GOOD INTENTIONS – ADVERSE IMPACT
The employee, a devout Jehovah’s Witness, was unaware of this office tradition that would include singing “Happy Birthday” not only on her birthday, but also on the birthdays of other team members. Because her religious views include the non-celebration of holidays, all holidays, including birthdays, are considered "pagan holidays". She feels torn between her faith, job and team.

Key Issue
A traditional practice in the workplace conflicts with an individual’s personal religious faith.

Implication
How to balance the intention of a tradition that is accepted, positive and practiced by most employees in contrast to another person(s) on the team. Avoid perception or resentment of employee to be antisocial and uptight that can lead to tensions and negative feelings between the team members and impact productivity.

What should manager do?
Jehovah’s Witnesses are often misunderstood because they refrain from many forms of celebration. This problem can be eased with a bit of education. The manager could

1. PROVIDE and use this opportunity TO LEARN practices of observant Jehovah’s Witnesses.
2. ASK and be mindful of the employee TO respecting their preference
3. Accommodations need not be complicated.
4. PRACTICE goodwill and listening to everyone’s preferences.
4. **Screen Saver**
One of your Christian employees placed a "Jesus Saves" screen saver on his computer and has religious icons and images of Jesus all around his desk. An agnostic employee has complained about this to her manager. She says it makes her uncomfortable to see this every day and she wants it all removed - now. These two members of the team are short with one another and tensions are escalating.
In a situation like this, trying to respect both employees' positions is challenging. A manager may find his or her personal position gets in the way as well. If the manager agrees with the agnostic employee and also dislikes the signs, s/he may address the dilemma one way; if the manager is a member of the Christian employee's church and welcomes the outward religious expression, s/he may lean another way.

**Key Issue**
Freedom of expression and religious symbols displayed at work.

**Implication**
Work environment that permits people to share and display their religious beliefs and expressions, at the same, maintaining a respectful and hostile free workplace.

**What Should Manager Do?**
In a situation like this, trying to respect both employees' positions is challenging. A manager may find his or her personal position gets in the way as well. If the manager agrees with the agnostic employee and also dislikes the signs, s/he may address the dilemma one way; if the manager is a member of the Christian employee's church and welcomes the outward religious expression, s/he may lean another way.

In this case, the manager needs to
1. **SET ASIDE** any personal position and consider the rights of the both employees
2. **BALANCE** right to for religious expression along expressed discomfort.
3. **CONSIDER** display of the religious symbol is causing hostility and adversely impacting business or just feelings of **DISCOMFORT**.

5. **Prayer Breaks**
An employee is an observant Muslim who prays 5 times a day, 3 of those prayers occur during work. Another employee complained to you on several occasions regarding a coworker making racist remarks and acting with hostility when the employee would pray at work.

**Key Issue**
There are two issues at play here: hostile work environment and response to request for accommodation based on a religious requirement.

**Implication**
A Tanenbaum survey shows that, when asked what would be most important in a
company’s policies, the employees rank time for prayer among the highest of their priorities. Among the groups responding, a greater percentage of Muslims and Christians emphasized their desire for this kind of policy, but Jews and Buddhists were close behind.

What should a manager do?

Offering flexible time for prayer can make the difference between keeping and losing a valued employee. Management should have

1. **MAKE effort to accommodate the employee.**
2. **PRAY during normally scheduled coffee and rest breaks.**
3. **OFFER** quiet, unobtrusive area in which the employee could pray.

The manager also has to make sure that the employer’s workplace is free from harassment. It might have been better for the manager to respond proactively, by investigating, trying to educate the harassing employee and, if still necessary, reprimanding the co-worker who made racist remarks. Both legally and from a business perspective, responding proactively is critical.

6. **Bearded Employee**
A Sikh employee had a beard as part of his religious practice. When he was hired, neither he nor his manager knew the corporate policy that prohibited facial hair when handling, preparing or serving food.

Not before long, HR informed him and his manager of the policy. If he intended to continue working for the company, he could not continue to have facial hair. The employee wouldn’t shave and resigned one week later. Since he resigned, instead of being fired, the company refused to pay him unemployment benefits.

**Key Issue:** A religious need clashes with grooming policy.

**Implications:** Companies should examine policies and dress codes in light of religious needs. It’s shortsighted for companies to deprive themselves of qualified candidates or lose valuable employees based on a feature that’s unrelated to work - and it can put a company at legal risk.

What should a manager do?

Upon learning of the situation, the manager’s first action should be to

1. **APOLOGIZE to the employee for NOT KNOWIN policy upon hiring.**
2. **ALLOW** the employee to express his feelings and concern and, while not promising anything,
3. **ASK** employee to refrain from quitting until the manager tries to sort it out.
4. GO to HR and, if necessary, organizational leaders and deliver the message
5. EXAMINE policies that impose job requirements that may not be necessary.
6. MAKE an exception in order to accommodate for a religious need.

The manager can also point out that policies like this limit the company’s ability to hire qualified candidates by imposing criteria that have nothing to do with performing their jobs. The company risks losing talent.

7. A Baby Shower
One of your team members is expecting a baby. A few of her colleagues want to coordinate a shower for her at work. When she is approached about the shower, she emphasizes that isn’t necessary and not to worry. Her colleagues insist they have and want to do something. They continue to make plans and make the shower a surprise. When she arrives at work one day, everybody screams “Surprise.” She is shocked and doesn’t look too happy.

**Key Issue**

Due to the close and friendly relationships that develop in the workplace, engaging and celebrating a team member’s pregnancy and other momentous times in one another’s lives is common.

**Implication**

Acknowledging and celebrating various events in team member’s lives evokes and promotes a positive environment at work.

**What should the manager do?**

1. **Remind the team** that the diversity of the team includes people ‘celebrate’ or acknowledge certain events in one’s life.
2. **ASK what is one’s preference.**
3. **CONVEY** good intentions of the team and at the same time, be mindful of each individual’s preferences.
4. **CONSIDER** using this incident as a way to have a lunch and learn on culture and the ways we celebrate or the expectations regarding various events in our lives, e.g. weddings, births, deaths, divorce, etc.
5. **PROMOTE healthy and informative meeting** to build cultural competence around life and cultural traditions.

8. Head Coverings
After applying for a position, a man was turned down because he wore a yamaka/kippah as an observation of his Jewish faith. The company had a policy against any employees wearing hats or head coverings.

The manager decided not to hire this candidate because the tenets of his faith did not require the kippah; therefore assuming the candidate would be willing to remove the
kippah at work. However, the applicant personally believed in covering his head and continued to adhere to this practice.

**Key Issue:** Individual interpretations of religious observances.

**Implications:** Attire issues are among the most common religion-related issues. To welcome and get the benefits from a diverse workforce, flexible attire policies are critical. Declining to hire this candidate due to a head covering opened the school to a lawsuit. More importantly, the school lost a talented teacher and the chance for its students to experience diversity in a very direct way.

**What should a manager do?**

Title VII requires that a "prospective employee's religious observances or practice" be reviewed and consider accommodation. In interviews, managers should

1. **FOCUS** on the job's requirements, avoid letting extraneous information interfere with decision-making, and hire the best-qualified candidate. (Note, however, that under Title VII religious organizations are exempt from the prohibition. It states: “a religious corporation . . . with respect to the employment of individuals of a particular religion to perform work connected with the carrying on by such corporation . . . of its activities” can use religion as the basis for hiring decisions.)
2. **CONSULT** the human resources department regarding hiring procedures.
3. **MAKE** clear that discrimination based on religion is not tolerated by the organization in any aspect of employment, including hiring.

If there is any question about this, the human resources department may want to consider proactive measures to prevent discrimination in hiring, like setting guidelines for managers who conduct interviews.

9. **Vegetarian at a BBQ**

Your annual BBQ is a big event for networking and getting to have face-to-face time with one another. Everyone in the team was sure to invite the newest employee, stressing how important and fun the traditional company event was.

The new employee is Hindu. She arrives and when it’s time to eat inquires about a vegetarian option? A coworker responds, “Come on! This is a BBQ, hot dogs and hamburgers! That’s a real BBQ!” She smiles, nods, and stays at the picnic. But you notice she doesn’t eat anything.

**Key Issue**
Dietary considerations employees based on religion, cultural, health requirements or personal preferences.
Implication
Considerations of food and drink that conveys consideration and avoidance of “unintended” ways an employee may feel excluded and separate from the rest of the group, team or company.

What Should the Manager Do?

1. **ASK FOR** specific requests, considerations or requirements for the BBQ.
2. **PROVIDE** a vegetarian or a kosher option
3. **SPEAK** to your value and recognition of everyone and their stomach, their diet.
4. **CONSIDERATIONS VS. RESTRICTIONS** One slight recommendation, instead of asking about one’s dietary restrictions, request to know of any considerations in regards to the menu or diet.

10. The Wedding
One of the people in your Division will be getting married. You understand that he is marrying someone who has recently arrived from India and is her first time in the U.S. You give the gift to the couple; they thank you and put it aside. You say “Go ahead, open it.” They then do. Inside are matching him and her wallets, belts and a leather bag for the bride. They look at it in the box, but don’t even it take it out or touch it. They don’t seem too happy or grateful.

Key Issue
In every culture, there is a protocol of what is appropriate and inappropriate or expected regarding gift giving.

Implication
Be mindful of what gifts are appropriate and convey your own understanding, sensitivity and knowledge of others traditions outside the mainstream culture.

What the Manager Should Do?
Taking the time to learn about various cultural or religious customs is important for managers in this ever-growing diverse and global work environment.

1. **READ OR SOLICIT Reading or resources from your I&D Department.**
2. **ASK & AVOID ASSUMPTIONS OF TRADITIONS** what is the common tradition for people of their faith or ask someone who is a member of that same faith for recommendations.

One common practice of Hindus traditional gift at an Indian wedding is money. The amount should be an "auspicious" number ending in 1 -- $11, $21, $51, $101, $201, $501, etc. (or similar numbers in rupees, pounds, or what have you). Cash or a check is fine. However, outside of India most Indian couples understand that giving money can be considered tacky and they don't expect it from their non-Indian friends. They've embraced the western tradition of giving house wares as gifts and many couples register at department stores. Any Hindus have strong views on slaughtering of cattle from where
raw material for leather belts and product come from. Proscription is against *eating* the animal, not against using its products either when alive (milk, dung, etc) or dead (hide). Otherwise staunch vegetarians would have no problems with leather.

11. The Latter Day Saints (Mormons)
You have a recent new hire to your team. In her first few weeks, she has performed quite well in her responsibilities. You invite her to one of the monthly meetings called ‘Chai Time’ where employees casually pick a topic to discuss and drink tea or coffee. She declines the invitation, yet you feel it would be a good opportunity for her to strengthen her relationship with people in the company. You later learn in Mormon tradition, drinking coffee or tea along with alcohol is forbidden. Later, you profusely apologize for the insensitivity and she looks at you with confusion.

Key Issue
Participation in an informal way for employees to network and discuss various issues.

Implications
When a manager invites an employee to an event, the unintended implication is that this is a requirement and not optional for her job.

What should the manager do?
Managers should remember the weight of their position and how certain information is provided and perceived. Even though, the employee is Jehovah Witness and doesn’t drink tea, the real issue she didn’t go to Chai time is because she is an introvert. She prefers to have one on one interaction rather than in a group. Managers
1. **REMEMBER NOT TO ASSUME** an employee’s actions or decisions **based on religion**.
2. **CONSIDER** personal preferences or personality that influence.
12. December Dilemma

It is now December and you always look forward to the season. However, this year it is feeling not so wonderful. Your team includes employees of all faiths and religions, as well as, agnostics and atheists. A few people propose at the staff meeting to have a secret Santa as a part of the holiday party. After the meeting, a few people come to you and express their disinterest in participating in a “Secret Santa”. Another employee expresses their frustration of why should there be a Holiday party when it really is a Christmas party that is a Christian holiday. You are feeling torn and don’t know what to do.

Key Issue
Acknowledging and ‘celebrating’ holidays during work hours.

Implications
Recognition of certain holidays by the employer and employees. Requirement vs. optional choice for employees to attend and participate in holiday planned events.

What Should the Manager Do

Recognize and address this issue as an I&D one, not a problem. Emphasize the desired outcome is to engage in these holiday traditions and at the same time, not exclude anyone. Ask or request a few people from your team to

3. SOLICIT SUGGESTIONS that create and reinforce a respectful work environment.
4. CONSIDER establishing new traditions that may be around the theme of end of the year events or a kick off for a New Year occurring the beginning of the year.
5. MAKE OPTIONAL If an employee raises an objection and does not want to participate in any of the planned activities, ask for their suggestions. Make attendance or participation optional.