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Expert Analysis Managing Spirituality Initiatives In The American Workplace

By Robert T. Quackenboss and Madalyn K. Doucet

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The embrace of spirituality initiatives in the workplace remains an emerging and underdiscussed trend in workforce management in recent years. The secularized workplace trend of prior decades focused merely on tolerance of spiritual expression, and was driven by fears of litigation, perceived distraction from productivity, and concepts of political correctness.

Now, more and more U.S. employers and CEOs see the “faith at work” movement as a means of improving business ethics, enriching employee wellness, and strengthening the bonds of their corporate community. The risks, they believe, can be managed. And the benefits, they have concluded, are substantial.

Spirituality’s Impact on Employee Motivation

Understanding what motivates employees is essential to the success of organizational objectives. Therefore, properly capturing and explaining the full range of such motivations are important. However, the classical and most popular theories describing employee motives have neglected, if not omitted entirely, the importance of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of motivation.¹

Employers advocating spirituality initiatives point to a common rationale: Employees do not leave at home their anxieties over personal matters, relationships, self-esteem, financial and health-related stresses. They directly impact the employee’s presence and success in the workplace and the productivity of her peers. Ignoring these issues, or treating them with arm’s-length employee assistance programs, known as EAPs, or human resources functions, misses an opportunity to heal the greatest detriment to motivation, positivity, wellness and productivity.

Spirituality programs offer an effective way to address what was once off limits at work. According to a 2017 Pew Research Center survey, 80% of American adults believe in God, and an additional 9% believe in some higher power or spiritual force.²

According to Princeton University’s Faith and Work Initiative, “[r]esearch shows that many students, workers, marketplace professionals, and leaders wish to live a holistic life that integrates, among other things, faith and work, but have few resources to help them do that.”³

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Mark Fowler, deputy CEO of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, and also an interfaith and inter-spiritual minister, observes that “today’s workplace is where one is most likely to encounter people of different beliefs. Employers can no longer walk away from the presence of religion and religious identity in the workplace. More and more, progressive and global companies recognize this and are moving effectively to incorporate spirituality at work.”

Popular Models of Faith-Friendly Programs

Spirituality programs in the workplace can take many forms, including faith-based employee resource groups, known as ERGs, or employee activities teams, known as EATs, on-site chaplaincy services, and executive-level management programs. Any one of these models, or several together, may be appropriate for a workplace depending upon size, demographics or the culture already established.

ERGs and EATs generally are employee-led, voluntary groups in which individuals with shared professional, cultural or personal interests meet for discussion and activities for relationship-building and enrichment based on those common interests. These groups can advance business goals as well as contribute to company culture and individual employee growth.

Faith-based ERGs or EATs generally take two forms: a faith-specific group (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, etc.) or an interfaith group, which focuses on spirituality not tethered to a specific religion. Ford Motor Company’s Interfaith Network, founded in 2001, is a successful example of the latter.⁴ Regardless of form, these faith-based groups often focus on activities such as scripture discussion, prayer, community outreach, and integrating spiritual interests into the employer’s business model and culture. They can also serve as forums for employees to discuss the pressures and challenges presented by recent increases in acts of religious intolerance.

Another emerging faith-based program model is the introduction of workplace chaplains. Workplace chaplains may appear for full-time engagements, periodic visits to work sites or on rotation schedules for employers who operate multiple facilities within a region. Many are trained to provide their services to a diverse workforce, focusing on spirituality, personal growth and emotional counseling rather than on the tenets of a particular religion.

Tyson Foods, for example, boasts nearly 100 on-site chaplains throughout the company.⁵ According to Tyson’s Director of Chaplain Services, Karen Diefendorf, their chaplains “work in a diverse, ‘faith-friendly’ environment where we can assist our diverse team members with a variety of religious accommodations. No matter a team member’s religious affiliation, if any, our chaplains ... are here to make a difference in our team members’ lives.”⁶ Workplace chaplains’ services to employees are confidential, as opposed to the services of corporate human resources personnel who must also keep one eye on compliance issues and risk mitigation. Workplace chaplains are often hired through private engagements, or through the assistance of a referral agency.

Employers have also designed spirituality initiatives tailored for executive management. Such programs can set a tone from the top that promotes integrity, honesty and a strong work ethic. The most successful executive-level programs leverage the input of larger workforce ERGs so that both the assembly line and the C-suite are pulling together to achieve those common values at all levels.

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Finally, a tone of spirituality and inclusiveness can be created with even smaller steps. Merely creating a designated meditation and prayer space that is open to all sends a powerful message of encouragement to employees. Dissemination of literature and resource information, along with spiritual and inspirational messaging throughout the workplace can set a tone that encourages spiritual reflection, discussion and creativity.

Practical Steps to Minimize Risks

There are several risks posed by establishing workplace faith initiatives, including religion-based discrimination, hostile work environment or retaliation claims. Wage-based claims, and unfair labor practice, or ULP, charges could flow from a flawed structure or poor communication. Incomplete or hurried execution could backfire and cause some to feel alienated or disenfranchised.

Each risk, however, is reasonably managed through thoughtful design and collaboration with necessary personnel and consultants. Following are some key recommendations to reduce risk:

1. **Choose the Correct Model:** Choose the best model for your workplace, taking into account workforce size, diversity, shift schedules and other characteristics. The program that is successful in a Missouri warehouse may not work for a Manhattan financial services group. Consult with HR and employment law professionals about the breadth of the program and the optimum number of participants in any groups.
2. **Executive Sponsorship:** To capture the benefits of a servant leadership model, executive sponsorship should be sought for each faith-based initiative to reinforce management support for the program.
3. **Establish Clear Written Rules:** Requirements for establishing a new ERG or EAT, guidance on visiting an on-site chaplain, and terms for using company facilities, for example, must be crystal clear and enforced uniformly. Decide on wage-related issues, including whether time spent with an ERG, for example, is compensable or unpaid. Update anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies to make clear that such rules apply to behavior within these groups or activities. Policies should make clear that establishing these programs is not an invitation to proselytize at work.
4. **Avoid NLRB Pitfalls:** Creating or sponsoring subgroups of employees can run afoul of the National Labor Relations Act if the groups interact or negotiate with management in a way that can infringe on a union's collective bargaining role. Likewise, if an employer guides or interferes with the flow of communication in such groups, it could trigger a claim under the act. Executive or management liaisons with these groups or activities should be mindful of the potential for missteps in this regard.
5. **Specialized Management and HR Training:** Traditional training about matters of religion have focused on accommodation and risk avoidance. With the introduction of affirmative spirituality programs, management (and in many cases human resources personnel) must be trained to both encourage and participate in faith-related discourse, but also to exclude matters of faith from any employment-related decisions.
6. **Precise Communications:** Both internal and external communication about spirituality initiatives must be designed carefully to emphasize several critical points. The company's goals in introducing the program must be spelled out to avoid incorrect assumptions about motives. Inclusivity and voluntariness in participation must be emphasized. The company's policies against discrimination and retaliation should be

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reinforced.

7. Legal Compliance Review: Involve legal counsel in the design of your programs, including those who have litigated workplace discrimination and harassment claims and are best able to spot missteps that create exposure. Be aware of state-specific laws that go beyond federal protections.

The Benefits — Increased Productivity, Creativity and Less Conflict

[T]here is ... growing evidence that handled appropriately ... faith/religion/spirituality at work might be socially progressive and bring benefits to employer and employee alike. In recent decades, CEOs and HR specialists have recognized the business benefits of treating employees holistically and welcoming diversity. And just as gender, race, and ethnicity are core parts of what constitutes human identity, so too is one's faith/religion/spirituality. - Princeton University's Faith and Work Initiative⁷

Employer advocates and consultants increasingly agree that the benefits of spirituality programs are worth the risks and administrative complications that accompany them.

Spirituality and holistic wellness are a natural component of the accelerating business ethics movement and its "triple bottom line" of "People, Planet, Profit."⁸ Prioritizing people necessarily means prioritizing their holistic well-being. As business ethicist Michael Josephson explains in a 2016 article, "[t]he employer-employee relationship should not be looked at simply in economic terms. It is a significant human relationship of mutual dependency that has great impact on the people involved. A person's job, like a person's business, are highly valued possessions that pervasively affect the lives of the employees and their families. With stakeholders everywhere, the relationship is laden with moral responsibilities."⁹

There is also a direct link between spirituality in the workplace and increased creativity among employees. Research suggests that creativity particularly blossoms where workplace managers display "servant leadership"¹⁰ — a focus on the success and well-being of the "other" rather than the self — which is a fundamental tenet of many models of spiritual belief. Nurturing this leadership skill is one of the goals of spirituality programming.

To those employers most focused on bottom-line results, spirituality programs can improve balance sheet results by increasing morale, lowering turnover, enhancing organizational loyalty, and actually lowering litigation risk by reducing workplace conflict. Deborah Dagit a diversity consultant who served as Merck's chief diversity officer for 11 years, reports that, in her experience, faith programs have "reduced tension and conflict between employees and managers over how one integrates their spiritual selves into the workplace. Personal time-off policies to allow time to celebrate non-Christian holy days, and dedicated prayer spaces for employees are examples that have helped to resolve and avoid conflict over scheduling and absences for prayer during the work day."

Similarly, as any veteran employment lawyer or human resources professional would attest, many workplace disputes and grievances are driven to some degree by loneliness, self-esteem challenges and social isolation. These root causes can be improved by relationship building, self reflection and exploring the kind of connectedness that many discover in spirituality. These programs will not eliminate workplace grievances or lawsuits, nor should they. But for the employee who is wounded by inconsiderate treatment by a coworker or supervisor, these programs provide help to someone who might otherwise see the legal system as the only way to be heard or understood.

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Conclusion

Advocates of workplace spirituality programs assert that Americans are in search, particularly lately, of beliefs and values they have in common. Identifying and building upon a common belief structure, while honoring religious diversity, opens doors for relationship building, dispute resolution and personal growth. The desire for spiritual fulfillment may just be that common bond, and the opportunity to introduce spirituality to an employee for the first time is an added benefit of “faith at work.”

Notes

¹ Guillén Parra, Manuel and Ferrero, Ignacio and Michael Hoffman, W., The Neglected Ethical and Spiritual Motivations in the Workplace (October 23, 2014). *Journal of Business Ethics*, (2015) 128:803–816 DOI 10.1007/s10551-013-1985-7. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2513791>.

² Pew Research Center, When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean? (Apr. 25, 2018), <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/>.

³ Princeton University, Center for the Study of Religion, Faith & Work Initiative, available at: <http://csr.princeton.edu/research/current-research/faith-work-initiative/>.

⁴ Ford, Employee Resource Groups, available at: <https://corporate.ford.com/careers/diversity/employee-resource-groups.html>.

⁵ Tyson, Faith in the Workplace, available at: <https://www.tysonfoods.com/sustainability/workplace/faith-workplace>.

⁶ Tyson, Celebrating Our Chaplaincy Program This Veterans Day, available at: <https://www.tysonfoods.com/the-feed-blog/celebrating-chaplaincy-veterans-day>.

⁷ Princeton University Faith & Work Initiative, Faith-Friendly Company, available at: <https://faithandwork.princeton.edu/research/faith-friendly-company>.

⁸ See Economist, Triple bottom line (Nov. 17, 2009), <https://www.economist.com/news/2009/11/17/triple-bottom-line>.

⁹ Michael Josephson, Ethical Responsibilities in the Employer-Employee Relationship (revised Dec. 17, 2016).

¹⁰ Wallace Alexander Williams Jr. et al (2017) “Servant leadership and followership creativity: The influence of workplace spirituality and political skill,” *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 38 Issue 2, pp. 182-183.

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