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THE DECEMBER DILEMMA

As America's Workplace Diversifies, Planning Celebrations Grows More Complex.

"There is no other month like December, when good intentions fueled by the Christmas season can negatively impact or even offend employees and customers who practice or observe other faiths and holiday traditions," says Karen Stinson, founder and CEO of the Minneapolis-based diversity consultancy ProGroup (www.progroupinc.com).

"It's what we call the 'December dilemma,' and with the American workforce and marketplace more global and religiously diverse than ever, the problem and challenges are becoming more pronounced," says ProGroup president Myrna Marofsky, co-author of *Religion in the Workplace: A Guide to Navigating the Complex Landscape*.



Kirk Lyttle/Knight Ridder Tribune

While about 82 percent of Americans are Christian, the presence of other groups is being felt, including Jews, followers of traditional Native American religions, Muslims, Buddhists and Sikhs, among others.

In fact, today there are more American Muslims than there are American Episcopalians or American Jews. At the same time, only 2 percent of companies officially recognize any religious holidays other than Christian ones, according to Marofsky.

The solution to the December dilemma isn't easy, Stinson says, given the strong emotions around the holidays and the traditional office Christmas party.

For example, Jehovah's Witnesses are prohibited from attending parties or giving gifts. And even Santa runs the risk of alienating people; some see him as a Christian icon, while others believe he has become secularized and should continue to be included in holiday parties and office decorations.

Stinson and Marofsky believe that at the root of the problem is a lack of awareness, respect and understanding for other faiths and holiday traditions. For example, many people believe Ramadan is a time of celebration for Muslims in December.

To the contrary, it's a solemn month marked by fasting and abstinence. Similar to Jewish holidays such as Hanukkah, Ramadan's date shifts from year to year because it's tied to the lunar calendar.

This year Ramadan began at sundown Oct. 25 and ended at sundown Nov. 24 followed by a joyous celebration called Eid Al-Fitr with eating, celebrating and exchanging presents.

To prevent misunderstandings, each year ProGroup produces its Honoring Differences calendar. It features more than 450 worldwide holidays, events and celebrations with practical information about their significance and practices, as well as dietary restrictions.

More than 1 million copies of the calendar have been sold since its introduction in 1996. (For ordering details, visit www.diversitycalendar.com.)

Tips for managing the December dilemma

- 1. Learn about the winter holidays and be familiar with the practices and significance of each.*
- 2. Keep holidays inclusive and informative. Try using a seasonal theme rather than a holiday one. Establish new traditions around parties and end-of-year gifts.*
- 3. Review your company's religion-in-the-workplace policies to be clear on what is acceptable regarding the December holidays. If you don't have a religion policy, create one.*
- 4. Include a diverse group of employees when planning events, but remember that you can't please everyone.*
- 5. Honor requests or challenges in the spirit of appreciation rather than tolerance.*
- 6. Consider scheduling celebrations or sending cards before or after the holiday season. If you do use cards during the holiday season, sending appropriate ones to employees and customers goes a long way toward making them feel valued. For example, many outlets offer cards for Hanukkah (Jewish) and Kwanzaa (African-American), which this year are celebrated Dec. 19-27 and Dec. 26-Jan. 1, respectively.*

7. Provide opportunities for employees to talk about their differences and share their holiday traditions and symbols, including their favorite foods.

8. Consider incorporating "holiday swapping" in time-off policies, whereby non-Christians can work on Christmas Day in exchange for taking a day off on a different religious holiday of their choosing.

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