

How Much Should Religion Be Practiced in the Workplace



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Last year an article by Mark Swartz on the pros and cons of allowing religious practice in the workplace caught my attention. Typical of complex issues, it triggered a cascade of related questions. As we grow to adulthood we tend to hide this sort of enquiry, which is so spectacular in children. It arises again when we face complicated questions of meaning, more of which tend to arrive as "mid-life crisis." That's when we re-evaluate whether we've just been accepting common opinion as easier and faster than working out what we really think.

Such questions tend to raise thoughts that drift widely, but we'll stay focused. This doesn't necessarily involve a question of what religion is at the outset. Most of us recognize spiritual thoughts in one form or another, though not always included in a specific system. The question here is whether particular creeds can or should be preached at work to others who may differ in beliefs.

Today, this question can be highly charged with concerns about conflict rather than as a help for community and unity as undoubtedly was the original intent of most major religions.

It might be easy to simply ban such activity as not in keeping with the primary of purpose of work: earning a living. But banning rarely works, and today all such questions are surrounded by legal pitfalls.

Though there are fairly well established social principles in our country of separating church and state, Human Resource policies still have to face the fact that certain religions' holidays are applied to the workplace by legislation in various ways. Even some highly religious political leaders, as Jimmy Carter did, support separation while others just as vehemently feel religion should be given a place.

The question becomes further complicated if we examine what preaching, promoting or proselytizing include. For instance, do these include wearing religious attire, bringing icons or carrying out personal religious rituals as well as direct attempts to convert? We may ultimately we have to look at what religion is to answer, but it helps to make a distinction between preaching and simply practicing a religion.

It is interesting to note that one answer may come from the best known writer on leadership, Jim Collins, in *Good to Great*, when he identifies the best leaders as "humble" - focused on demonstrating by deeds rather than by "preaching" in order to motivate and guide people. So soft spoken were these exceptional achievers that they ducked media coverage until their companies' financial results exceeded the average by three times or more, which made it impossible to escape attention. Then they gave credit entirely to their teams.

This raises two questions. If the greatest success is produced by leaders who refuse to preach even work principles, why would an organization's directors allow others to press openly for personal beliefs and potentially confuse results? Secondly, why would anyone want to if the results they're hoping for clearly aren't as effectively achieved by preaching as by other methods? Preaching in general, religious or not, is probably best left out of the workplace. What this line of reasoning also does is more clearly place religious preaching into an area of personal asides from work, in case there was any doubt.

Most would argue that we should not restrict what people do outside of work time, even if it occurs at the workplace itself. And perhaps that is the answer, as long as employers honor their other responsibilities - to safeguard staff from harassment, which is to say they have a duty to prevent occurrence of behavior that reasonably ought to be known to be unwanted by individuals. So preaching may be OK so long as it's clearly restricted to breaks, lunch, before or after work - and, again in keeping with other non-work activities, so long as individual recipients' requests to be left alone are strictly honored from the moment the request is made and there is no subtle or indirect coercion otherwise.