



Do You Have Arab and/or Muslim Employees in Your Workplace?

After the events of September 11, the media in America have provided general help to people trying to cope with intense emotions. But we have seen little information compiled for managers, business owners and human resource professionals about how to cope with possible consequences of these emotions at work. We offer these suggestions as part of our contribution to healing.

Reports of threats and violence against Arab and Muslim employees – or those believed to be from those backgrounds – concern many employers. Even though a small number of extremists apparently carried off the terrible events of September 11, Americans who do not know any Arabs personally – or who generalize from one characteristic of the terrorists – are susceptible to intense fear and may threaten or discriminate against people who remind them of the accused terrorists. Threats, fear, violence itself and an atmosphere of intimidation will diminish productivity and severely damage morale. As with other issues that evoke fear, your best prevention of these problems is two-pronged:

1. Give employees a clear statement about where the company stands
2. Provide reliable information

The suggestions we list here may help your workforce to respond positively in the midst of rising suspicions and fear. We base them on several foundations:

- Many years of helping employers and employees to deal with the fears provoked by HIV and AIDS
- Several years of providing workplace-oriented diversity seminars
- Our training in emotional intelligence in the workplace
- Formal study of theology and management
- Discussion with the director of the Center for the Study of Religion at UCLA, who has reviewed and supports them

Action items for employers of Arab or Muslim employees

- ◆ **Reinforce your non-discrimination policy publicly and proudly.** Commitment to non-discrimination is among the fundamental strengths of most U.S. employers. Cite it as a point of company pride. Your policy may appear in your employee handbook, your recruitment and hiring guidelines, or your customer service guidelines. Wherever the non-discrimination policy is stated, post it prominently. Place it in the context of emphasizing now what makes your organization strong.
- ◆ **Make sure that all employees greet and welcome your Arab-American or Muslim employees, customers, vendors and clients just as they greet and welcome everyone else.** Arab-Americans and all those who practice Islam probably are feeling extremely vulnerable as people who share only a few characteristics of those believed responsible for the terrorist attacks. They fear being painted with the same brush. Fear heightens the sense of being dismissed or disrespected. Prevent problems by making your welcome clear.

- ◆ **Educate your workforce about the differences between those who practice Islam and the terrorists.** Muslims now outnumber Presbyterians in the United States. Overwhelmingly, they are law-abiding citizens, productive members of the workforce and integral members of their American communities. Many have made it clear that they abhor the terrorists' actions. Many describe Islam as a "religion of peace." This is true of Islam as it has been practiced around the world for centuries. (The vast majority of Muslims live in Indonesia, not the Middle East.) Use whatever method fits your workforce to educate your employees. Methods may include:
 - Inserting information from this document and others on the same topic into your company intranet, email, employee newsletter, pay envelopes, bulletin boards or company-wide mail.
 - Inviting an employee who practices Islam to speak at a gathering for all employees, even briefly. Giving an Arab or Muslim employee a chance to express grief over the terrorists' attacks and explain why the terrorists' actions violated the most cherished beliefs in Islam could prevent discrimination and increase understanding. At such an event, the company's highest-ranking official would be well-advised to stand beside the employee, making it clear that the company supports its employees of all backgrounds.
 - Inviting a local imam or scholar of Islam to explain the differences between the worldwide practice of Islam and the terrorists' actions. Include time of Q & A.
 - Ask your human resources staff to find a reliable fact sheet about Islam and distribute it to all employees
 - Join with other employers in your area to sponsor community-wide educational events about Islam and the contributions of Arab Americans and their highly-developed cultures to U.S. culture. This is especially important if there are many Arabs or Muslims in the area from which you draw employees.

- ◆ **Provide information for all employees about the coming holy days of Ramadan,** the annual period of spiritual discipline for followers of Islam. Members of other religions may not know about the difficult challenge that Ramadan poses. Adherents may not consume any food or liquid during daylight hours for about 30 days. Christians familiar with Lent will know something of the concept of giving up a well-loved food or activity, but may be unfamiliar with the stresses of following the regimen that Ramadan imposes.

- ◆ **Review your written and informal policy about dress codes.** Make sure that employees are not discriminated against for their style of dress. Muslim women often cover their hair with a long scarf and dress more modestly in general. Jews may wear yarmulkes, the small skullcap that covers the crown of the head. Sikhs of both genders wear turbans. Muslim men may wear close-fitting knit or woven caps. All of these express deeply-held values and tend to be protected practices in workplaces where they do not pose a safety hazard. Within these religions, people who hold to these practices are not seeking to call attention to themselves, but to honor their beliefs.

- ◆ **Follow up swiftly and decisively if any acts of discrimination or intimidation do occur.** Progressive discipline is appropriate for any employee who threatens, mistreats or condemns an Arab or Muslim employee. The standards you apply to racial or ethnic discrimination apply in this case.

- ◆ **Check in with employees who may be too frightened to seek you out.** Ask employees quietly how they are doing. If you discover an employee who is very fearful, determine whether other employees' behavior toward the person has indeed changed. Address that change in behavior immediately.
- ◆ **Be sure all employees know how to use your employee assistance program or mental health referral.** Delayed intense reactions to events such as the terrorist attacks are common.
- ◆ **Seek guidance immediately from your community's or your state's human relations council** if you observe or hear of any threats or discrimination in your geographic area or business network. Report the threats or discrimination to local law enforcement officials. Do not hesitate to involve law enforcement. Your employees' safety is at risk if threats or discriminatory behavior are permitted to continue unaddressed.
- ◆ **Focus on each employee's and the whole group's productivity.** Religion in the workplace has a long history of interesting and well-argued legal cases that your management attorney can describe for you. Your job is to keep your own focus, your supervisors' focus and ultimately your employees' focus on the work at hand. There are helpful precedents for coping with employees who evangelize at work, decorate their cubicles with religious objects or seek to impose their religious values on others at work. In the aftermath of September 11, our task is bigger than the ongoing work of managing a multicultural workplace. It is keeping the country's social fabric woven together. Being productive together can be part of that task.

The Unabomber, Theodore Kozinski, is Polish. Timothy McVeigh was Irish-American. Their actions were not based on their cultural heritages. Neither were the terrorists' actions based on theirs.

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