

# Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

It's over - another whirlwind of end-of-the-year religious and secular holidays including Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, and New Years. With them came the usual questions and controversies about what should be discussed or displayed in the workplace with regard to these holidays. Should employees be allowed to play Christmas music in the office? Is it appropriate to allow decorations relating to Kwanzaa? Is a Menorah an acceptable desk ornament?

Underlying all these questions are more fundamental questions of what we believe about diversity. After all, if we really believe all that has been preached on the value of diversity, shouldn't we be encouraging diverse individual expression, tolerance, and understanding? And how can understanding occur without expression and corresponding dialogue? Why would we not encourage an individual's reasonable expression of who he or she really is, based on what each individual believes about life's deepest questions? If we can't talk about the things that are dear to us, how can anyone really understand us? Furthermore, how can the concept of diversity as a strategic advantage exist alongside a policy of checking your heart and humanness at the door?

Slightly over a year ago, a good friend and colleague, Dave Whetten, gave a speech as the President of the Academy of Management. In his remarks, he stated, "What I believe matters most to the future of this organization, is predicated on our willingness as individual members to share with one another what truly matters most to us as complicated, complex, sometimes internally inconsistent, but always aspiring to be better, human beings. I am troubled by the prospect that those who are new to our field...might leave their encounters with us feeling socially unconnected and professionally unfulfilled."

Although these remarks were directed to members of the Academy, I believe that Dave struck a particularly meaningful chord for the many who work in organizations with no-tolerance policies that snuff out discussions of personal interests, culture, and religious beliefs. As most any diversity leader will say, diversity extends beyond skin color and linguistic expression. In other words, within each worker there exists a real person with concerns, doubts, fears, hopes, beliefs, and practices that give life meaning. Not surprisingly, we find it easier to relate to our coworkers when we understand them and discover that they are real people too.

If we encourage personal expression, we help people who work together to understand each other at a deeper level, and by doing so, reduce fear, misunderstanding, intolerance, and bigotry in the workplace. For example, as an employee, I may think differently about a fellow employee who takes several short breaks each day when I realize that rather than being lazy, as I had imagined, he was actually engaging in a religious observance required by his religion and supported by company policy. I may have greater empathy for a coworker who refuses to work weekends when I understand that she is more than willing to work Sundays but not Saturdays or vice versa, because one of those days is dedicated to family and religious commitments. When I see various symbols related to a particular culture or belief in several employees' work areas, asking questions, participating in discussions, and making connections will help me comprehend what is important to them. This kind of understanding helps to prevent suspicion and inaccurate perceptions. It also leads to more meaningful relationships,

greater group cohesion and mutual support for group goals.

I have read recently of many businesses that have shed their fear of cultural and religious discussions and who actively promote diversity and greater interpersonal understanding in the work place. In fact, several organizations, including the National Institute of Business and Industrial Chaplains (NIBIC), have a membership comprised primarily of corporate chaplains from a variety of religions who are contracted by businesses to counsel and support employees and provide information to promote understanding and communication. The premier organization for human resource professionals, The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), has created an electronic document called “Understanding Religion in the Workplace” which provides information about cultural practices related to certain holidays, and a synopsis of various religions including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hindu. Managers in all kinds of organizations can use this resource to accommodate various employee beliefs.

Taking liberties with Dave Whetten’s remarks, I believe that organizations that support tolerance for diverse perspectives and beliefs and that promote employee conversations of those things that “matter most” will create workplaces with employees that are “socially connected” and “professionally fulfilled” and who can unite to use that diversity for business success. And when the next big event in an employee’s life occurs, whether as a holiday or family event, maybe employees will talk about it and find new meaning in working together.

Kevin Herring is President of Tucson-based Ascent Management Consulting, a firm specializing in individual, group, and organization effectiveness.

At Ascent we believe that organizations are only as successful as the systems that engage the individuals who work there. Ascent Management Consulting is committed to creating management, culture, organization, and governance systems that enable personal fulfillment and organization effectiveness.

Kevin can be reached at 520-742-7300, kevinh@ascentmgt.com, or [www.ascentmgt.com](http://www.ascentmgt.com).