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The Balancing Of Church and Cubicle

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

Q. You want to take time off for a religious observance that does not occur on your day off or on a paid holiday. Should you tell your manager the reason, or just take it as personal time and leave it at that?



A. Although some companies give employees paid personal days off — and don't require them to divulge the reason — it's a good idea to be upfront about it, according to Mary Hladio, chief executive of [Ember Carriers](#), an organizational development consulting firm in Cincinnati.

Speak to your manager privately, letting her know that the time off is for a religious observance, so she understands why the day off is important to you, Ms. Hladio says. If you don't have unpaid personal days but don't want to use vacation days, offer to make up the time, says Laurie Beth Jones, C.E.O. of the Jones Group, a business consulting and coaching firm in San Diego and author of "[Jesus, Career Counselor.](#)"

Ms. Jones suggests proposing a solution to your manager, like coming in early or working later for several days.

If it's crunch time for your team, however, don't expect to take the day off without making arrangements for others to cover for you. "Be aware how your request affects the rest of your team," she says, "and give as much advance notice as possible."

Q. What about asking for things like separate cabinet space for kosher food, or the ability to pray several times a day? Do you risk being seen as a demanding employee or someone who gets special treatment?

A. If you approach the request in a respectful way and with the goal of working out a solution collaboratively, you're far more likely to find your boss and colleagues willing to work with you, says Douglas A. Hicks, a professor of leadership studies and religion at the [University of Richmond](#) and author of "[Religion and the Workplace.](#)"

For example, if you need a few minutes several times a day to pray, offer to make up that time by coming in early or cutting lunch short.

When it comes to requests for special cabinet space or permission to dress a certain way, employers generally draw the line at anything that disrupts the workplace, Ms. Hladio says.

“If wearing a [hijab](#) is going to be seen by other employees as too much religion in their face, your manager may say no, although there’s usually room for discussion,” she says. Ideally, these kinds of issues are negotiated when you are hired, to avoid conflict later.

Q. *Is it O.K. to put up religious symbols or sayings in your office or cubicle?*

A. Yes, as long as those around you aren’t distracted by them or find them blatantly offensive.

Especially if your work space is a cubicle, make sure that anything religious — or anything personal, for that matter — is within your private space and not on an outside wall. “Most companies have a policy that says inside your office or cubicle you can put up what you like,” Ms. Hladio says.

If you see clients in your office, however, says Joshua Zuckerberg, a partner in the labor and employment practice of the law firm Pryor Cashman in Manhattan, keep in mind that it’s a place for conducting business — and that this needs to be evident to clients.

“You don’t want it to look like you’re proselytizing, for example, by having a large crucifix on the front door,” Mr. Zuckerberg says. “You don’t want to be seen as imposing your views on others.”

Q. *If your employer tells you it’s not acceptable to express your faith at work — whether in how you decorate your office, how you dress or what you say to others — is this religious discrimination?*

A. The law says you have a right to be free from discrimination based on religion, but that’s generally in cases of blatant discrimination, like being fired or not hired because of your religion, Mr. Zuckerberg says.

Everything else is a balancing act between the interests of the business and employees’ desires to express their beliefs. Employers do have an obligation to understand and decide whether they can honor an employee’s requests.

“It’s generally a reasonableness test,” Mr. Zuckerberg says. “If an employer can show that your request is an undue burden on the business, they can say no. If you want to leave early on Fridays to observe the Jewish Sabbath but the company only has three employees, that simply may not be possible. On the other hand, if the company has 2,000 employees, it probably won’t be a problem.”

Q. *You sometimes want to discuss things related to your faith, like religious teachings or an interesting sermon you’ve heard. Is that appropriate at work?*

A. People around the water cooler talk about all kinds of things — sports, dating, family, sex, births and religion — and it can all be acceptable, Mr. Hicks says. The important thing is to be sensitive to the response you receive from others.

“If they act disinterested or uncomfortable, you have to stop,” he says. “It’s all about mutual respect.”

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