

The Case of the Religious

Network groups for black and Hispanic employees had been an unqualified success. Now a Christian group was forming – and Bill Thompson didn't know what to think about it.

by Ray Friedman

BILL THOMPSON, a general manager at GenCorp, listened again to the voice-mail message Alice Lawrence had just left him.

"Bill, something's come up in the New Orleans plant that I want your input on. Some of the folks down here are setting up a Christian network group. Is that...?" Alice paused; she sounded unsure of what to say next. "I don't even know if company policy allows that. But I have to say it's got me nervous. Call me when you can, okay?"

One of the company's most experienced accountants, Alice had been temporarily assigned to the newly acquired Louisiana plant to bring its accounting system in line with GenCorp's. Bill was overseeing the acquisition and integration of plants in Georgia and Louisiana, and was temporarily based in Atlanta, setting up a regional headquarters there.

Alice was hard to ruffle, but she sounded really upset. Normally, Bill would have done his homework before returning a call like this. He would have tried to figure out what a Christian network group was, and what the company's policy on such a thing might be. But he didn't want to leave his longtime colleague hanging, so he picked up the phone and dialed.

"So Alice, this is news to me. What's going on?"

"All I really know is that a group is being formed," she said. "And of course I know that the company – and you especially – have strongly supported network groups in

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Network Group



the past, but this one concerns me. Russell Kramer appears to be one of the organizers."

Bill knew that Russell was an effective plant manager. "Why's Russell a problem?" he asked Alice.

"I'm afraid I have to back up a couple of years," Alice replied. She explained that several gay employees had approached her—knowing that she was openly gay—and shown her a letter Russell had written two years earlier, before GenCorp had acquired the plant. The letter, which had gone out to everyone in the plant, talked about how sinful homosexuality was, based on quotes from the Bible. Alice read a passage from the letter: "Listen to this, Bill—'We should treat homosexuals, like all living creatures, with compassion. But the homosexual lifestyle is an abomination.'" Apparently, other managers at the plant were not startled by the letter, but gay employees were angry and frustrated. They said nothing, however, not wanting to reveal that they were gay.

"I know that happened a long time ago—before GenCorp was in the picture—but it does show that folks like me have a hard row to hoe already," Alice added. "They don't need a full-blown group opposed to them. You've got to find a way to stop it, Bill."

"But Alice, you're assuming this group has a particular agenda. You don't know that, do you?" Bill asked.

Alice admitted that she didn't. Bill pointed out that they could be meeting simply to pray together or to provide community service. Still, he acknowledged that he, too, felt uneasy about the situation. "I hear your concerns, Alice, but let's not jump to conclusions," he said. "I'll get back to you as soon as I can—and keep me informed in the meantime."

GenCorp and Network Groups

Bill had been with GenCorp for more than three decades. He had seen it grow from a large, regional paper-goods company to a national one. Like most senior managers at the company, Bill was proud that GenCorp had a good record of recruiting minorities and supporting their ca-

reers. Indeed, *Black Enterprise Magazine* listed GenCorp as one of the 20 best places for blacks to work. That success was due in part to the creation of self-organized social support groups for minority employees, called "network" groups.

Network groups emerged at GenCorp in the late 1970s, when African-Americans were first being hired for sales and management jobs. Many

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felt isolated. White colleagues always seemed to have more information than they did, they felt, and many weren't sure how they could move up the ladder. In response to these problems, several African-American engineers and salespeople started meeting at night to talk about work and ways to enhance their careers.

The group turned out to be a very positive experience for black employees, who developed better networks, found mentors, and gained peer support. As time went on, the group sponsored programs on sales techniques and new technologies, as well as personal financial planning seminars that drew many white participants. Initially, the company was wary, but soon it became clear that the network group helped the company retain top talent, meet its EEO goals, and gain favorable publicity.

GenCorp hadn't placed a lot of restrictions on the network groups. They were welcome as long as they met after hours and were open to all employees. They were allowed to use the company's copy machines, e-mail, and conference rooms. Over the years, Asian, Native-American, and Hispanic groups had formed—and most recently, groups made up of gay and lesbian employees.

Searching for Advice

After hanging up the phone, Bill walked down the hall to Cliff Brook's office. Cliff was director of logistics

for the South. He'd been extremely helpful to Bill over the past five months, and Bill had come to trust his judgment. Indeed, after the transition period, Cliff was slated to run the regional office. Cliff had grown up in a small town outside of Indianapolis but had spent most of his working life in Georgia and Louisiana, including several years at the New Orleans plant.

Bill explained the situation to Cliff, who didn't see what the problem was. "Russell is a great guy, and he's one of the best plant managers we have. That letter didn't show great judgment, but the fact is, that's what a lot of churches teach about homosexuality. Besides, Russell doesn't have a hating bone in his body.

He was honestly concerned about his fellow employees' well-being.

"The gay thing is just a red herring. Alice Lawrence is blowing something that happened two years ago way out of proportion. I think a Christian network group is a great idea. I'm sure they'd do community service work, which would be great for the company."

Bill felt even more confused after his talk with Cliff. The next day he asked Mike Turall, the head of HR for the new region, to stop by his office. He asked Mike how he thought the company should respond to the idea of a Christian network group.

Standing in Bill's doorway, Mike rocked back and forth on his heels as he contemplated the question. "The purpose of the groups is to help minorities feel less isolated, right?" he said. "Yet Christians are certainly not minorities in the company. As a matter of fact, non-Christians have a problem sometimes. One Jewish employee from New York told me he feels strange knowing that most members of his team meet for a Bible study group once a week—and they seem to be close friends as a result. It's even stranger for Christians who don't want to participate in that kind of thing. Imagine how they feel when their boss asks them to participate. It's hard to say no to your boss."

Mike wondered out loud: Since a Christian network group could not, by definition, be trying to overcome

social isolation, what was it trying to accomplish? Would it become a vehicle for proselytizing?

From a policy perspective, though, he didn't see much choice. "The company's policy is to allow network groups to form wherever employees want them. We got out of the business of deciding which groups to accept and reject a long time ago. To tell you the truth, we never anticipated something like this."

"So should we change our policies, Mike?"

"Perhaps," Mike responded, "but I'm not sure how to write a policy that would preclude religious groups but protect the others. And at this point, wouldn't it be obvious what we were doing? I think we had better talk with corporate HR to see what they think."

Bill wondered if they could find a way for all network groups to coexist peacefully. "What if we were to have a policy that network groups couldn't engage in proselytizing or any activity that's disrespectful to other employees?"

Mike scratched his head. "That sounds good, but how would you enforce that policy? I'm certainly not going to attend every meeting. And besides, someone like Alice is going to feel uncomfortable just knowing

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that a conservative Christian group got any endorsement at all from the company. And frankly, I bet Russell feels the same way about the gay and lesbian group."

Once again, Bill came away from the meeting with more questions than answers. Next he called Becky O'Connor, his boss in Connecticut. Becky immediately expressed her concern about religion in the workplace. "The office is not the place to practice religion. Christian groups

have no business within GenCorp, and neither do Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist groups. Religion is a private matter." Nonetheless, she cautioned, the company should respond slowly and carefully.

"Remember when the first black group formed? We got way ahead of ourselves worrying about it. I guess we assumed its members had a militant agenda before we even knew what they were trying to do. That got us into more trouble than anything else. We don't want to overreact." Bill agreed with Becky's last remark but pointed out that in the South, religion was not at all private. "People talk about church, prayer, God, and Jesus all the time. There is no way to keep religion private down here."

After Bill hung up the phone, he knew that he had to talk directly with Russell Kramer. He called Russell at home that night, saying that he had heard about the Christian group. He also mentioned Russell's letter from several years ago. "I don't want to bring up old business, but employees at the plant still have copies of that letter, and they're forming ideas about what the Christian group's agenda would be on the basis of that letter," Bill said. Russell was taken aback by the call and was surprised that his letter was still circulating.

"Bill, you and Mike Turall are the ones who told us that network groups were such a great part of GenCorp's culture. How can it be a bad thing for people who share a religious point of view to gather together?" Russell admitted that he had strong beliefs about homosexuality but said that was not in any way the focus of the group. "The group is there to let us share our spiritual lives and learn from one another."

Bill thanked Russell and quickly got off the phone. He found, on reflection, that he still wasn't sure where he stood on the matter. He

was uncomfortable about having religious activities endorsed by the company, but if all the Christian group wanted to do was have after-hours prayers, would that be a problem? He also wondered whether he'd feel more comfortable with the group if it were organized by people from nonevangelical denominations, like his own.

To make matters even more complicated, Mike Turall stopped by the

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next morning to report that one employee had telephoned to ask him whether people were entitled to "Christian rights" in the workplace. Apparently, this idea was being discussed widely on radio talk shows, and several books on the topic had recently been published. The employee who had called was not part of the network group, but Mike wondered what legal challenges might be raised if GenCorp prohibited a Christian network group.

Bill wondered what to do next. It was true that network groups had enhanced the company's relationship with minority employees. But his intuition told him that the Christian group was different in important ways. Was he overreacting? Should the company accept Christian network groups or try to stop them? And from a practical perspective, how could he block them without undermining the company's existing network groups?

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What policy should GenCorp adopt toward religious network groups?

Five commentators offer their advice on what GenCorp should do.

Companies should create conditions that will help people express religious convictions productively in their work lives.



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Ten years ago, no one would have predicted the explosion of spiritual interests among the supposedly secular business community. But in today's corporate America, the formation of Christian network groups is one of many ways businesspeople are trying to regain a sense of balance and direction in their lives.

Are we surprised? Popular employee-development programs – from Steven Covey's secular spiritu-

ality to Peter Senge's holistic learning – established a beachhead for a new corporate mind-set. Expressing the typically American fascination with the exotic, a wide variety of programs followed: African manhood rituals, Native-American fire walking, Buddhist meditation techniques, transcendental visualizations. Despite the secular, therapeutic packaging, those practices pushed the envelope on religious tolerance. It was only a matter of time before more mainstream faiths demanded airtime.

As a result of this religious reemergence, old fears of an intolerant religious establishment have resurfaced. People have begun to worry that any religious congregation of workers will lead to undesirable outcomes such as intolerance of differences and subtle pressures to conform. Those concerns are valid. One need only remember the company housing projects that required Christian pictures on the walls, or the formal exclusion of Jews and African-Americans from many a corporate-sponsored country club event.

But the fear of all public expression of religion is itself a disturbing sign of intolerance. Our society seems more comfortable with public displays of sexual preference than of religious devotion. As the case notes, networks based on race, gender, and sexual preference are fully encouraged in most progressive corporations and schools. Religious networks are not. Categorical intolerance only begets intolerance. Knee-jerk intolerance of religious networks could invite an attack on

gender and minority affiliations without ever addressing the underlying problems inherent in *all* exclusive networks.

Can corporations promote tolerance and diversity and still support religious affiliations? The United States is a particularly religious and religiously diverse culture. Employees who hold strong religious convictions can help companies uphold ethical standards and otherwise support the higher purposes that legitimate capitalism. Rather than suppress religion, companies should create conditions that will help people express religious convictions productively in their work lives. Several guidelines for all network groups can help companies like GenCorp achieve a balance between supporting employees' individual spiritual lives and protecting core values such as tolerance and inclusiveness.

Gather more information about why the group is forming. Some religious networks are formed as a militant cultural counteroffensive. But that's no reason to assume that every religious group is militant. Get the facts: Is the group trying to create a visible symbol of power and entitlement, one that might seem threatening to other groups? Or are its purposes benign, privately directed, and, in fact, likely to benefit the organization? These questions of intent must be answered not only by the organization but also by potential members of the group.

Consider whether the group's intent could contradict its own values and the corporation's social contract. In many cases, the use of an affiliation to gain an unfair advantage begins as an unintended consequence that is later pursued with abandon. Take the executive who quietly adopted the practice of wearing a bracelet with the letters WWJD (What would Jesus do?). She did it to remind herself of her faith. But when she discovered that the bracelet earned her special treatment from like-minded employees at airline counters and elsewhere, she began ostentatiously waving her arm whenever she got in a bind.

Ask if the network is promoting or silencing honest expression. Does

the religious group seem to think it has all the answers and none of the questions? One executive told me he had been openly critical in his prayer group of a business partner who behaved dishonorably. The entire group then berated the executive for feeling competitive and unloving toward the business partner. He never shared his feelings again, and at church and in his prayer group he made sure he put on a "good face" regardless of the circumstances. If a group is suppressing truthfulness, it has no place in the corporation.

Pay attention to appearances. When religion is practiced in public, group members need to recognize that their actions may be viewed with suspicion. To ignore outsiders' suspicions is to encourage even greater hostility. Take the high school group that formed a prayer circle every day in the middle of the halls, with their backs to the rest of the students. Their posture signaled a very visible exclusion of others. The circle seemed unintentionally to have touched off a shooting spree by a disturbed student who had long resented being left out of social groups in general. Although it's true that most employees won't express hostility so destructively, this example shows that exclusive behavior can be corrosive over time.

Consider opportunities for forging new connections inside the corporation. One of the best ways to counter potential misunderstandings and suspicions is to deliberately create new links within the company. Why couldn't the religious network group and the African-American network group sponsor meetings on common problems, such as work-family concerns or ethical questions in the workplace? At BankBoston, for example, the Gay and Lesbian Resource group combined its giving with the African-American group and the Parents' Resource to help a youth program and a local AIDS prevention group. Working together to identify mutual charitable interests is a great way to establish commonality among diverse groups. The key to tolerance in the workplace is communication, shared values, and shared activity.

The recovery of religion in our public life could lead to a new vision of what it means for people to be profoundly engaged with their work. Achieving new levels of commitment is increasingly important in a global economy. But the religious presence must be rooted in tolerance and self-critiquing humility. The corporation must walk a fine line—allowing an outlet for religious expression while not permitting religious groups to create or perpetuate intolerance.

If the point of the group is to share a common interest rather than to overcome discrimination, the status of the Christian group should be on the level of other shared-interest groups, including community volunteers and the softball team.



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To understand Bill Thompson's dilemma, we need to think about the nature and purpose of network groups. The first groups to come onto corporate radar comprised people who have been historically un-

derrepresented: African-Americans and women. Other racial and ethnic groups followed their lead. Most recently, and most provocatively, GLBT—gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender—networks have formed. Christians are now contending that if all those people have a case for a group, so do they.

The past and ongoing purpose of network groups is to help their members contribute their full talents to an organization. They help individuals turn away from self-doubt and toward collective engagement. They let employees see the patterns in their experiences. When stories are told at group meetings, a recurring refrain is, "That happens to you, too? So it isn't just me." And when the patterns are recognized, positive results can follow. A woman reflecting on why her comments are not heard in meetings might stop thinking, "I should take an assertiveness course" and realize instead that "we need a better way to run meetings here." Network groups can generate changes that redound to the benefit of all employees, such as job-posting systems, on-site child care, and more inclusive health benefits. They can also help the organization learn from employees' differences.

So network groups make sense when they exist to remove obstacles to performance. Do Christians face such obstacles? In the Northeast, where religious conviction is often suspect, the answer might be yes. Subtle insults along these lines might be a problem: "As soon as I mention attending church on Sunday, my colleagues seem to snicker and ask how I can be a hardheaded economist with such superstitious beliefs." Christian groups might uncover—and help eliminate—comments that make it difficult for people to concentrate and do their work. They might also, for example, make it possible for employees of all religions to turn down business trips during their religious holidays. And that outcome, which would likely boost morale, would benefit the company as a whole.

But a Christian minority is less likely in the South, where the assumption is that most people are

churchgoers. In those circumstances, the employees who should be forming a network group are those who cannot answer "Which church do you belong to?" with "Well, none" without feeling that their opportunities at work are in jeopardy.

And that's why any blanket rule either allowing or not allowing network groups is not a good idea. In trying to come up with such a rule, we are left without an answer to the common retort, "Why can't whites or men form groups?" When managers think about adhering strictly to the letter of the law, any identity group seems to have a basis for existence. But when they consider the spirit of a diversity policy, they are forced to answer thorny questions about why some groups are different from others, even if they look alike.

Although the proposed Christian group in this case does not meet the

criteria for a network group, that doesn't mean that the Christians shouldn't organize. The key issue is whether they want to meet to pray and to study the Bible as a shared interest or to discuss workplace inequalities as part of a shared commitment to valuing diversity. If the real point of the group is to share a common interest rather than to overcome discrimination, the status of the Christian group should be on the level of other shared-interest groups, including community volunteers and the softball team. Those groups—more informal than network groups—connect people from all parts of the organization and make the workplace much more enjoyable. And they do so in an inclusive manner and with relatively little risk of raising controversy. That looks like a better fit for the Christian group that is being proposed at GenCorp.

their new environment. You do it out of respect if you're smart; otherwise, you won't be accepted and you won't succeed. There are similar issues when a northern company acquires a southern company.

Clearly, GenCorp needs to develop a policy on all special-interest groups. It would be a mistake to isolate one group and treat it differently from others. One of the key questions then becomes, What are the pros and cons of permitting groups—whether they're made up of African-Americans, ethnic groups, Christians, or women—to meet and use the company's facilities?

To answer that question, I'd do two things: First, I'd figure out who knows the most about these special-interest groups in the newly acquired company. I'd ask them to relate their experiences with such groups. When have we succeeded? When have we run into problems? What can we project will be the benefits and risks that come from such groups?

Second, I'd want to hear from the people who would be most affected by the policy. To get everything out into the open, I'd organize focus groups in the plants. The policies will be a lot easier to implement if people feel they've had their input. Management will be much less likely to run into protests from employees—or even litigation—if the process is open and fair.

At our company—a family-run business with about 500 employees—issues around diversity, if they arise at all, seem to get resolved without dispute. We had a security guard here who was an evangelical, Bible-carrying, very committed Christian. If you visited him in the guard gate, his Bible was there. But he knew he wasn't there to preach. He brought his religious orientation to the workplace in the most effective way possible. He lived his faith and commitment by example.

My life and the lives of others have been enriched by attending voluntary Christian fellowship meetings on company property. We've addressed the challenges of living a Christian life and prayed for personal guidance and a deepening faith. My



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GenCorp acquired the New Orleans plant for strategic reasons, and management needs to understand the work ethic and culture of the people who work there before integrating them into the company. The onus is on the acquiring company's managers to be sensitive to customs long

GenCorp needs to develop a policy on all special-interest groups. It would be a big mistake to isolate one group and treat it differently from others.

honored and permitted in this southern town. That's the only way the organization can maintain people's commitment and ensure a smooth transition.

When our manufacturer opened a plant in eastern North Carolina, it requested the assistance of a local company to help managers understand what makes people down here tick. They found differences in the way people treat one another and in how they expect to be treated. To come south and try to impose Illinois culture on North Carolina people would have been a big mistake.

When U.S. managers and their families accept assignments in foreign countries, they quickly learn to adjust to the way things are done in

experience has taught me that Christian groups, when abiding by the same guidelines for other special-interest groups, provide spiritual encouragement and a deeper faith—and can benefit the company as a result.

GenCorp should not adopt a specific policy on religion-based network groups. It should, however, have very clear requirements for all network groups.



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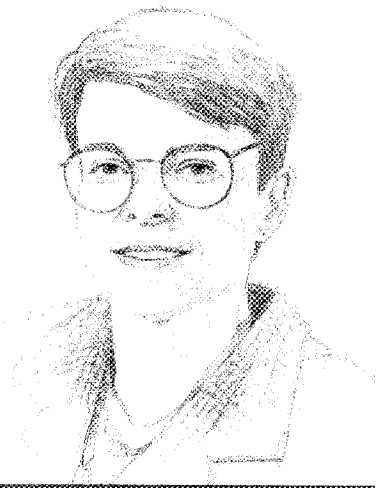
If GenCorp's predominant employee population is Christian, the company's sponsorship of a Christian network group is likely to be perceived as ominous by its non-Christian employees. To avoid the appearance of bias, GenCorp would have to sponsor other religiously based network groups. Failure to do so would leave the company exposed to lawsuits based on claims of a hostile work environment or religious discrimination. And how would the company decide which religious groups to sponsor? Would it exclude white supremacists or Satanists or other such extremists?

GenCorp would face several challenges if it decided to sponsor the Christian group. First, it would have to prevent the group from spreading ideology that might disrupt the work routine, constitute religious harassment, or create a hostile work environment for employees who do not share the same beliefs. As a result, it would have to devote an inordinate amount of time to monitoring materials generated by the group. It would also have to ensure that managers who belonged to the group did not favor Christians when hiring or promoting people. The company would have to go out of its way to emphasize that participation was voluntary and not a requirement for success. Accordingly, it would have to monitor whether Christians were being disproportionately promoted, and it would have to track all employees who identified themselves as being of a particular faith.

GenCorp has determined that network groups can be a positive force for its employees and for the company as a whole. It should continue to capitalize on the strength of network groups while redefining their role. The groups' missions, goals, and activities must adhere to GenCorp's policy of valuing diversity.

GenCorp, then, should not adopt a specific policy on religion-based network groups. It should, however, have very clear requirements for all network groups. Group membership must, for instance, be more inclusive than exclusive. Groups must also be required to provide support for members, to sponsor programs and activities that can benefit all employees, and to assist the company in meeting its goals. In addition, GenCorp should develop written guidelines for all employees that state the company's core business values (such as integrity and respect) and standards of conduct (such as accountability) with customers and within the work environment. These guidelines, coupled with an enhanced network-group policy, would help reinforce individual responsibility and would foster a workplace environment that values differences among employees.

Employees should not be asked to check their beliefs at the plant or office door, but religion cannot be allowed to become a distraction or a problem on the job.



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GenCorp should adopt a policy that would officially sanction employee network groups only if they help serve the company's mission. With that stipulation, it is unlikely that this religious group would clear the necessary hurdles for recognition.

That's because Bill Thompson's intuition sounds correct: the Christian group would in all likelihood be fundamentally different from other groups. GenCorp's black employee group, for example, helps its members network, find mentors, and gain peer support. It also helps the company achieve its aims to retain talent, meet EEO goals, and earn favorable publicity. The Christian group, on the other hand, sounds like it might be more about personal camaraderie—an opportunity for people with the same religious beliefs to identify one another, study the

Bible, and pray together. There don't appear to be any specific company goals that would be met, even if potential members feel the group would have a positive effect on their productivity or general well-being.

As for "Christian rights" on the job, those rights should end as soon as a religious worker begins to create a hostile workplace. In many offices and plants, for example, evangelical Christian workers are allowed to ask coworkers if they have accepted Jesus as their personal savior, but as soon as a coworker says, "I don't feel comfortable discussing this topic with you," the religious worker must stop.

That does not mean that the Christian group could not or should not exist informally, with a lesser degree of company support. Consider how Hewlett-Packard handles this situation. A number of informal Christian groups exist at HP, according to Kim Harris, program manager for corporate workforce diversity. "They are not officially approved, and we don't even know how many there are," he says. Members meet to

pray and study the Bible but only on their own time. They can use office space if it's available, but they usually cannot reserve it. They may use e-mail distribution lists but not company bulletin boards or newsletters to advertise their existence or their meetings.

By contrast, formally recognized employee groups at HP receive company funding, staff support from the human resources department, and other assistance. In turn, they must attempt to meet the company's goals, including employee retention and loyalty, development of business skills, awareness of diversity issues, and good citizenship through community involvement.

Besides the fact that a religious group is unlikely to focus on meeting company goals, there are other reasons to question the wisdom of sanctioning the group at GenCorp. Gay and lesbian employees at the plant have good reason to be nervous about a network organized in part by Russell Kramer. His letter of two years ago made clear how he uses the Bible to justify antigay attitudes –

and no matter how well-meaning, his "love the sinner, hate the sin" rhetoric is patronizing and inappropriate in the workplace. Moreover, he's the plant manager. As Bill seems to recognize, when a key management figure is the driving force behind a religious group, employees could feel compelled to join or to keep quiet about their objections.

Employers do have a responsibility to accommodate their employees' religious practices within reason. That might translate, for example, into paid time off for employees observing religious holidays. Some workplaces have designated spaces for meditation and silent prayer. Many workers are religious people, and spirituality is often a central part of their lives. The ultimate goal at the workplace is respect and toleration. Employees should not be asked to check their beliefs at the plant or office door, but religion cannot be allowed to become a distraction or a problem on the job. 

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"Peterson, could you send in a life preserver?"

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