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Avoiding Festive Season Culture Clashes by Tom Verghese



Dr. Tom Verghese is Principal and Founder of [Cultural Synergies](#). His work helps organizations perform at optimal levels, improving cross-border staff engagement, communication, and relationships. Expert in the field of cultural intelligence, Tom applies a practical approach in helping organizations understand and leverage cultural awareness and diversity to successfully position their businesses in the global marketplace. As we approach a season filled with many religious celebrations, Tom's blog fittingly reminds us to respect our differences.

"With the end of year and festive season rapidly approaching I am always mindful of the significance of religious holidays to different cultures. I thought it would be apt to discuss acknowledging religious holidays in the workplace and how best to navigate this topic in a respectful and inclusive way.

Religion is a key component of how people and societies make sense of their existence and provide meaning to their lives. Religion can also act as a moral and ethical guide for behaviour and is a defining element of many cultures. It is only natural that some of the practices and beliefs people have as part of their religion intersect with the workplace. **As many workplaces exist within a cultural setting dominated by one particular group, it is increasingly necessary for businesses and leaders to adopt an agile and aware approach so they can be inclusive and supportive of their staff.**

A situation I encountered with an organisation in Australia a few years ago demonstrates how contentious and uncomfortable it can be when awareness around the importance of religious holidays is not in place. The organiser of an event to be held in Melbourne for an Asia Pacific team could not understand the response he received when the event dates were released. Members of the team in Asia Pacific were upset and distressed at the timing of the event and there was a lot of push back. As it happened, the event was scheduled to take place during the Chinese New Year celebrations which are of course a significant time in a number of Asian countries. When we discussed this issue, I mentioned to him that it would be the same as scheduling this event during the Christmas /New year period in Australia and he then realised his error and made changes to the event dates to avoid causing further offense.

This example highlights the importance of using Cultural intelligence (CQ) and if we apply it in terms of the components of CQ—Drive, Knowledge, Strategy and Action—we have a complete and practical guide to unpacking and evaluating the best way to manage situations like this in the workplace.

If we take into consideration these theoretical steps to acknowledge religious holidays in the workplace, what are some of the tangible actions we can take to navigate this type of challenge in the workplace? Some suggestions include:



1) **Be Ahead of the Game**—Use a **Diversity Calendar** that notes the important dates from many religions, so you are able to be aware of timing and scheduling for meetings, busy periods etc. There are numerous ones available on the internet.

2) **Be Inclusive**—Find the shared values within religious holidays that can be used to unite and connect people regardless of individual religions.

3) **Be Flexible**—Allow staff time off during important celebrations and be aware of when they occur during the year so major conflicts can be avoided

4) **Be Aware and Respectful**—When organising parties ensure that non-alcoholic beverages and religious dietary requirements are considered.

5) **Be mindful.**

6) **Recognise and Educate**—use the opportunities of religious celebrations and holidays to highlight the benefits of diversity and allow people to appreciate cultures beyond their own. Perhaps encourage an education session on the particular event.

Through the use of CQ we can better understand people and culture whilst also creating a space where diversity and inclusion is valued, and the benefits realised. **As globalisation and its impacts continue to change the way we work, it is vital that we take conscious steps to be more inclusive and accommodating in our approach to different cultures."**

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