



Developing a Faith-Friendly Workplace

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“Faith-based vs. Faith-friendly Workplaces” was a topic that received a high score in a 2011 survey where we asked CEO Forum members to rank possible CEO Forum White Paper topics.

We modified the topic to reflect what we think is the bigger interest of our CEOs—how to create faith-friendly workplaces, although we will also address here the difference between what it means for a company to be faith-friendly vs. faith-based.

We are blessed to have among the Forum’s membership Dr. David W. Miller, Director of the Princeton University Faith & Work Initiative. David is a leading expert on faith and work and has written one of the premier books on the subject, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (Oxford University Press), and often serves as a personal advisor to CEOs and others.

David graciously agreed to provide the content for this paper. We’ve taken much of that content from interviews and articles generated around the time David’s book was published, but he has updated the content for us and included some additional insights.

What is a faith-friendly company?

The goal of a faith-friendly company is to recognize the centrality of faith in many employees, and their desire to live an integrated, holistic life both at work and in their private life. A faith-friendly company does this in a way that is respectful of all faith traditions by creating a culture of respect, diversity, inclusion, and tolerance.

The minimum corporate standard is to obey the relevant laws on religious discrimination and harassment, but being faith-friendly goes beyond a compliance attitude. Being faith-friendly actually embraces the role of faith, and invites people to bring their whole self to work—mind, body, and soul. According to David, a *faith-friendly* company is:

- Welcoming, inclusive, and respectful of all traditions, particularly minority traditions
- Honoring of a worldview grounded in faith as common to humankind around the world and since the beginning of time
- Willing to learn about and be attentive to the needs of various religious traditions and practices, while respecting the needs of the business, other employees, and the laws of the land
- Affirming of holistic treatment of employees, and valuing the whole person at work—body, mind, and spirit

A *faith-based* company, by comparison, is more overtly grounded in a particular religious tradition and might imply privileging one tradition over another. In publicly traded companies, this is

problematic on a number of grounds. However, for smaller and privately held businesses, a faith-based approach may be perfectly appropriate, so long as all relevant laws are followed.

Why should I consider making my workplace faith-friendly?

Faith at work is a social issue and a business differentiator whose time has come. “The faith-at-work movement,” David says, “though still in its early stages, often lurks just below the surface, but increasingly is in our faces as employers. Our options are to try to avoid the potentially politically and emotionally charged issue, or be proactive in embracing it and finding ways to integrate it into our workplaces.”

Employees today, especially those of younger generations who are more culturally diverse than previous ones, are less willing to compartmentalize their lives. They do not park their faith at the door, but rather they bring their whole selves to work—faith and all. They expect to be accepted for who they are and accommodated.

At the same time, aging baby boomers, still an influential part of the work force, are following the established trend that (at least in numerous surveys) faith becomes more important as people get older. So both ends of the spectrum are—perhaps for different reasons—yearning to integrate faith and work, and are no longer satisfied to live a compartmentalized life.

Just as caring for the physical and emotional health of one’s workforce is becoming a part of good business practice, so too is caring for their spiritual health. Smart business leaders and corporate executives are realizing that the whole person matters. And the happier and healthier people are in their personal life, the happier, healthier, and more productive they will be in their corporate life. This attention to caring for the emotional well-being of employees began with EAP (Employee Assistance Programs). Recognizing the need to address the spiritual needs of employees is a logical progression.

David is currently conducting in-depth research on ways that people tend to integrate faith and work through The Integration Box theory and instrument. One preliminary finding is that companies who strive to be faith-friendly may well create the conditions for higher trust and ethical behavior. Moreover, there is emerging evidence that being faith-friendly might have a powerful positive influence on consumer perceptions of the corporate brand and on attracting and retaining top talent.

How do I go about it?

David recommends a process that brings folks along, instead of an edict issued from on high. Talking to managers and employees about what faith-friendly means to them, and how they'd like to create a faith-friendly culture, is a good starting point. Forming a small task force, with members representing diverse faith traditions, can provide an opportunity for employees to identify possible benefit and draft new policies, as well as identify obstacles and suggest ways to resolve them.

The ways forward will differ. Some companies will embrace religious affinity groups, or even workplace chaplains, as part of being faith-friendly, while others will not. Whatever you do, David advises that you be sure your policies are *consistent*, across all faith traditions. And as with any other evolving workplace issue, it is important to anticipate scenarios, educate your management team, and consider changes to policy.

When drafting policy guidelines, David advises that it is important to take into consideration these basic questions:

- Is our policy exclusionary or inclusionary?
- Does it create organizational chaos or creative potential?
- Will it cause or prevent lawsuits?
- Will it promote group infighting or greater understanding?
- Is it likely to scare off or attract and retain top talent?
- Does it disempower or empower minority traditions?
- Will emotional or rational dialogue be the outcome?
- Is the language neutral?

To be sure, being faith-friendly is not talking about bringing religion into the workplace. It is about bringing our whole self to work, and the deep spiritual roots we all share. Note that language can shut down or open up dialogue. David recommends “faith” as the umbrella term that encompasses the words “religion” and “spirituality” and is more widely accepted as neutral and less laden with pejorative associations.

Conclusion

"When dealing with the issue of faith in the workplace, perhaps the most important thing to remember is that there is no one size that fits all. Be willing to listen, learn, and laugh along the way. Develop policies that are consistent with your corporate DNA and culture," David advises. Further, he says, "Don't be afraid of hiccups along the way. You will inevitably face some problems and pushback, but I'll wager that you'll face even more problems, legal and otherwise, if you ignore the issue."

It sounds like the old adage still rings true: The best defense is a good offense.

Should you wish to contact David with any thoughts or questions about his ideas pertaining to "faith-friendly" companies, you may reach him at: David W. Miller, PhD, Princeton University Faith & Work Initiative, dwm@princeton.edu, or at The Avodah Institute, davidmiller@avodahinstitute.com. You can also follow his ideas on faith and work at <http://faithandwork.Princeton.edu> and <http://faithandworkblog.com>.