Best Practices for Quiet Rooms

February 2015
Introduction
As our workplaces become more religiously diverse, accommodation of the spiritual needs of employees is a growing challenge facing diversity and inclusion (D&I) professionals. Contrasting viewpoints among and between religious and more secularly-minded employees are potential sources of workplace conflict, and astute D&I practitioners are introducing an arsenal of best practices to address this issue and promote workplace harmony. One effective practice is the designation of spaces within the workplace for prayer, reflection, and relaxation. These “quiet rooms” provide employees with a temporary refuge from the turbulence of the work environment and opportunities to satisfy their spiritual needs, which often results in more productive, satisfied, and focused workers.

This report focuses on these quiet rooms, how best to design and introduce them, and their advantages and disadvantages. It also looks at the social, legal, and business context that is making this D&I practice so valuable and necessary.

The Growing Demand for Accommodation of Religion in the Workplace
A 2013 survey by the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding found that one in three employees in the United States believes that employers do not accommodate religion in the workplace. (The mission of the New York City-based, secular, non-sectarian nonprofit is to develop “practical programs that bridge religious difference and combat prejudice in schools, workplaces, health care settings and areas of armed conflict.”1) Although the researcher concluded that Muslims face discrimination more often than other religious groups, they also reported that “workplace discrimination is also a serious issue for many members of America’s Christian majority. Six in ten white evangelical Protestants agree that discrimination against Christians has become as big a problem as discrimination against other religious minorities.”2 The comparable figure for non-Christians surveyed was one in two.

To Tanenbaum’s CEO Joyce Dubensky, the study reinforces the belief that religion is becoming a key diversity issue: “If there’s one message from this survey, it’s that religion is a workplace issue . . . Employers who ignore it, do so at their own risk.”3 She cautions that “American workplaces increasingly reflect the makeup of the country; they’re more and more diverse. Work is the place where people with extremely different beliefs interact on
regular basis. But where there’s more diversity, the survey shows that we can expect to find more conflict.”

Many of the study’s other findings relate to employee satisfaction and demonstrate the impact of a company’s religious diversity practices (or the lack of them) on employee satisfaction, recruitment and retention:

- Employees of companies that do not address religious diversity are almost twice as likely to seek employment outside the company as their counterparts in companies that have religious diversity policies.

- Nearly one-third of workers who reported religious bias complained that the company took no action to address the concern.

- Atheists (59 percent) are most likely to believe that co-workers are contemptuous of their beliefs, as compared to non-Christian workers (31 percent) and white evangelical Protestants (32 percent).

- A substantial proportion of atheists (55 percent) state that they suffer from discrimination. They are also much more likely than white evangelical Protestants and the workforce in general to believe that Muslims, gay and lesbian workers, Latinos, and women also face significant discrimination.

Dubensky is not alone in her opinion that religious diversity is a threat to workforce cohesion. Liberty Institute’s General Counsel Jeff Mateer warns in HR Magazine, “We’re heading to conflicts between corporate America and evangelical Christians if their religious beliefs are not accommodated.” (The Liberty Institute is a nonprofit law firm that advocates for religious liberty.) Mateer bases his opinion, in part, on the number calls he receives from Christians who believe that workplace policies violate their religious beliefs. One evangelical Christian, for example, contacted him seeking an exemption from diversity training, because she believed its content violated her religious beliefs.
The Dynamic Religious Environment of the United States

Numerous social, cultural, and political factors influence the growth of religion as a workplace issue. The political environment is becoming increasingly divided by religious issues, as the rift between religiously affiliated and non-affiliated Americans continues to grow. According to Pew Research’s Religion and Life Project, Americans who identify with a religion “have become significantly more supportive of churches and other houses of worship speaking out about political issues and political leaders talking more often about religion.” Between 2010 and 2014, the percentage of people who saw religion’s role as positive increased from 49 percent to 58 percent; while 43 percent of survey respondents said that churches should be vocal about social and political issues. Forty-nine percent supported that position in 2014. The politicization of religion intensifies its potential to become a source of discord in the workplace.

Moreover, the religious affiliation landscape is very dynamic with faiths both losing and gaining adherents. For example, 31 percent of Americans were raised Catholic, but only 24 percent of the Americans consider themselves Catholic. This decrease is partially offset by the 2.6 percent of U.S. adults who have joined the church and the large proportion of Catholics among new immigrants to the United States. There also is significant internal diversity within many of the nation’s religions, such as the hundreds of different denominations associated with the Protestant church and Islam’s Shia-Sunni split. These differences are evident in Table 1. Based on the findings of the Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, the Table provides an overview of the religious landscape of the United States today. Pew’s interviews with more than 35,000 Americans age 18 and older found “that religious affiliation in the U.S. is both very diverse and extremely fluid.”

Table 1: The Religious Affiliation Landscape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Percent of U.S. Population</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian 78.4%</td>
<td>Protestant 51.3% (Evangelical churches, 26.3%; mainline churches, 18.1%; historically black churches 6.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catholic, 23.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mormon, 1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jehovah’s Witnesses, 0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orthodox, 0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish 1.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist 0.7%</td>
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</table>
Meeting the Religious Diversity Challenges in the Workplace

Of course, the workplace is not immune to the cultural, social, and political forces generated by these conflicting religious and secular beliefs. As these dynamics become manifest in the workplace, they pose a number issues that the D&I professional must address. Local managers also need somewhere to turn for advice. How does the D&I function promote tolerance between disparate beliefs and non-believers (e.g. evangelicals, GLBTQ, and atheists)? Can the company accommodate the spiritual need of religious employees without offending or appearing to neglect non-religious workers?

The most fundamental approach is to ensure that all disparate groups—religious and non-religious—feel valued and that their needs are met. If employees believe they are treated fairly, they are much less likely to be resentful of accommodations provided to other employees. According to Naina Patel, the United Kingdom’s chair of the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, “If you show consideration for someone’s faith, most people will respond in a responsible and appropriate way.”

Of course, implementation of even the smallest improvement requires careful, sensitive, and informed planning. Every effort should begin with consultation with the group you are attempting to serve as well as other groups that could be affected. Despite its good intentions, Centrica, a supplier of gas and electricity in the United Kingdom, offended some employees when it attempted to meet the dietary requirements of its Muslim employees. When Centrica began sourcing meat for the company canteen from halal butchers, it discovered that Sikh employees and other non-Muslim found the halal process offensive and objected to eating meat prepared using this method of animal slaughter, which is based on Islamic law.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>0.6% (Sunni, 0.3, Shia and others 0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.5% (other world religions and faiths (e.g. New Age, Unitarians, and Native American)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>16.1% (includes atheists, agnostics, and “nothing in particular”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to David W. Miller, director of Princeton University's Faith & Work Initiative, the benefits of religious accommodations far outweigh the risks: “Just because it's thorny and awkward and potentially laden with some issues doesn't mean you don't do it if it's the right thing. You just have to figure out how you manage it.” Miller affirms the value of a “faith-friendly approach” to all forms of religious expression, including atheism, because it results in “employees who have greater engagement, greater loyalty, lower absenteeism, greater creativity. And there's growing evidence also that it becomes a differentiator when people are trying to decide between two different employers.” Many companies are proving that even small measures can make a significant impact on advancing and respecting religious diversity in the workplace. They recognize the benefits these accommodations bring to improving employee morale and enhancing employee retention and recruitment.

Some companies, for example, make special accommodations for dress and grooming practices based in religious practices:

- J.P. Morgan Chase encourages female employees who are Muslims to wear the traditional hijab head covering if they wish.
- IBM provides Muslim women employees with two identification cards, one with the hijab and one without. Only female security officers are allowed to check the card without the hijab. It also provides a washroom to accommodate Muslim employees who wish to wash their feet for daily prayers.

Companies also use flexible scheduling and make special arrangements to allow employees to meet religious obligations and practice their faith:

- American Express encourages its staff to organize employee resource groups (ERGs) serving the needs of religious affiliations. American Airlines has Christian, Jewish and Muslim employee ERGs, which help generate revenue for the company and make the company more astute about multi-cultural issues. The Christian employee resource group brought in an extra $900,000 in sales in 2014 by connecting sales people with Christian churches and conventions. The Muslim employee group educates flight attendants about Islam and its traditions. It also
ensures that airports have prayer rooms and arranged to provide halal meals on some flights.¹⁷

• Manhattan’s Eneslow Pedorthic Enterprises Inc. allows Muslim workers to leave two hours early if they wish to break their Ramadan fast at home.¹⁸

• Tyson Foods employees more than 120 chaplains representing 27 different Christian faiths. The company also works with leaders of other faiths to support employees of other faiths.¹⁹

• DB Marketing Technologies in Manhattan hosts its holiday party at a kosher restaurant that provides meat- and dairy-free dishes that meet the dietary requirement of Orthodox Jews and Hindus.²⁰

As noted earlier “quiet rooms” (also known as “prayer and meditation rooms”) are one of the most effective ways that companies can demonstrate their commitment to religious diversity and provide employees with an environment to express their religious identity. Companies like Orbitz Worldwide Inc., the online provider of travel services, are adopting this practice. When it opened its new offices in Chicago, Orbitz created a space for its employees for prayer, because managers noticed that employees at the previous locations used stairwells for their daily prayers. Now these employees have a more comfortable and private place to practice their daily prayer obligations.²¹

Creating a “Quiet Room”

Quiet Rooms were first envisioned as “Prayer Rooms” to provide comfortable spaces for employees who were members of religions (e.g. Islam and Orthodox Judaism) that required daily prayer at certain times during the workday. However, the concept evolved to ensure that the practice did not appear to “endorse any particular religion or belief system” and offend non-religious employees and religious employees of other faiths.²² The name “Quiet Room” emphasizes that these non-denominational places for worship or reflection were open to all employees, including non-religious workers, who would benefit from the availability of a place for meditation or reflection. In addition, companies designed the room
to suit the various needs of the members of their workforces and made the designs flexible so they could be changed to accommodate new employees’ needs over time.\textsuperscript{23}

Ford Motor Company introduced “meditation rooms” as early as 2001. The company began with two meditation rooms in Dearborn, Michigan, one in England, and another in Germany. According to Rob Matras, diversity and worklife coordinator for Ford’s product development organization when the practice was first introduced, a meditation room was “for individuals or groups to utilize for meditation, prayer, contemplative thought or a mental break to reduce stress. It's not a break room. It's not for a lunch break. It is a quiet space.”\textsuperscript{24}

The Business Case
The concept of “Quiet Rooms” has flourished in Great Britain, in part, because of the need to address the needs of its growing Muslim population. St. Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London has been a pioneer in promoting “Quiet Rooms.” The Centre developed a guide of the best practices for creating and managing quiet rooms. \textit{Recovering the calm: Best practice guide to prayer rooms and quiet space at work}\textsuperscript{25} is a detailed, practical exploration of the steps required to build and manage them effectively.

The Centre also has developed a business case for “Quiet Rooms,” which outlines the benefits to the sponsoring corporations. According to the Centre, “Quiet Rooms”

\begin{itemize}
\item Offer a pro-active demonstration of a business’ commitment to diversity and inclusion.
\item Enhance a company’s reputation for supporting employees, helping “attract, motivate and retain staff”\textsuperscript{26} and reducing hiring and training costs.
\item Make a statement about the firm’s commitment to people of all religious backgrounds, which is attractive to potential clients and customers.
\item Enhance relationships between employees and builds trust at a time when trust between people and faiths is increasingly important.
\end{itemize}
• Provide the wellness benefits associated with meditation and contemplative prayer, such as reduced stress and depression, increased ability to focus, and enhanced creativity.²⁷

**Getting Started**
Achieving these benefits and creating a “Quiet Room” that meets the needs of employees and the business requires careful and sensitive planning based on solid, insightful research. The process for developing, designing, and managing of a “Quiet Room” has to successfully blend the competing demands of different employee groups, facilitate smooth operation that accommodates changing needs, and ensure ongoing attention to business needs. We have created Figure 1 to outline a project plan that meets these demands. The strategy is based on best practices developed and tested by the Centre and other D&I practitioners.
Chart 1: A Process for Designing and Launching “Quiet Rooms”

Initiate
Design and launch a planning & execution process to gather data & insights; generate support; engage employees, faith groups and other stakeholders; produce an effective, informed design; implement project plans, open facility, and provide for ongoing, effective management of the “Quiet Rooms.”

Step 1: Research and Explore
Answer the following questions based on an objective, informed analysis of the company and its needs.
• Is the company large enough to support a “Quiet Room?”
• What is the faith make-up of the workforce?
• Can you balance the needs of the business with the faith needs of the staff?
• What are the legal ramifications of a “Quiet Room” for your business? Will it help you meet regulatory requirements?
• Is there an available space that would be an appropriate location for the facility?

Step 2: Consult
• Launch a consultative process to develop a more knowledgeable understanding of the faith needs of the workforce.
• Use this process to ensure employees are involved in the planning process, develop a personal stake in its success, and ensure that all interested employees and faith and non-faith groups are represented.
• Employ this process to socialize the concept with other stakeholders, including management, to develop support for the project and gain the confidence of decision makers in the project team.

Step 3: Formalize
Formalize the consultative process by inviting and enabling interested employees to form a team to help in the design and ongoing management of the facility. This quiet room users group should also participate in the development and implementation of operational policies and a communications plan to ensure employee awareness.

Step 3: Design and Develop Policies
• Create a design plan for the room that reflects best design practices for “Quiet Rooms,” which are discussed below.
• Develop inclusive policies that promote the use of the room, are sensitive to the needs of people of different faiths and non-believers, and ensure that all individuals feel welcome and are not discouraged from using their room.
• Develop processes for ongoing oversight of the room once it opens. These processes should identify metrics for measuring usefulness and continuous evaluation, facilitate consultation with all user groups, and enable timely corrective measures to resolve issues that arise.

Launch
Open the doors to the “Quiet Room,” ensuring ongoing adherence to policies, effective oversight, and commitment to making adjustments to improve the services provided and to meet changing needs of users and the business.
Best Practices for Designing and Managing a “Quiet Room”

The effectiveness and utility of a “Quiet Room” depend, in part, on its design and location. Fortunately, designers and D&I practitioners have developed a set of best practices that provide useful guidance in planning the physical characteristics of these facilities. These practices encourage planners to

- Locate “Quiet Rooms” near restrooms to accommodate the faithful who need to wash their hands before prayer.

- Provide adequate access for people with disabilities.

- Ensure the room is oriented so that the users can pray in the direction (usually east or south-east) required by their faiths. (Doors should be situated so as to ensure people entering the room will not disrupt prayer.)

- Provide moveable screens to enable Muslim men and women to pray separately.

- Avoid any religious or other imagery that might suggest a preference for one faith over another and do not use decor and objects that might be offensive or off-putting to members of particular faiths. (Members of some faiths are uncomfortable with realistic depictions of humans and animals in a religious context.)

- Employ neutral colors, subdued design, and appropriate lighting to create a calming, welcoming environment.29

Of equal importance are the policies developed to manage the ongoing operation of the “Quiet Room.” Using the accepted and proven best practices to guide the development of these policies enhances the chance of creating an effective administrative plan. Successful management of a “Quiet Room” provides for:

- On-going and attentive management that is inclusive, responsive, and sensitive to unique needs of its user groups,
• Consultation with a “Quiet Room” user group that represents all of the faiths and non-believer groups that use the room. This group helps ensure inclusiveness and helps ensure that the room is available when individual user groups need access.

• Interaction between all user groups to maintain harmonious sharing of the facility.

• Awareness, understanding, accommodation of the “different expressions of spiritual etiquette” of different faiths (e.g. the removal of shoes or concepts of cleanliness).

• Communication processes that build relationships between user groups, make necessary guidelines and rules explicit, understandable, and respected.

• General workforce awareness of the facility, its mission, and how individual employees can use it for his or her benefit.

• Formal processes and metrics for monitoring the use of the room and ensuring that policies and its mission are adhered to.

• Specific processes for evaluating if the room is meeting expectations of users, other employees and management.30

**Conclusion**

By consulting these design requirements and administrative guidelines, and developing “Quiet Rooms” that reflect the latest thinking, D&I practitioners can successfully introduce a tool that will help them address the growing challenge of meeting the spiritual needs of employees in an increasingly complex spiritual environment. “Quiet Rooms” are a useful D&I practice that can turn potential source of discord and controversy into an opportunity for greater harmony, creating, and employee satisfaction.
Endnotes


6 Jeff Mateer quoted by Dori Meinert in “Matters of faith: take a proactive approach to accommodate workers’ religious needs and minimize potential rifts,” HRMagazine, December 2013, Vol. 58 (12)

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