

**** Press Release ****

Workplaces Across America Grappling With December Dilemma

Holiday Season Poses Yearly Challenge for U.S. Employers

NEW YORK, NY – Dec. 20, 2006 -- In many workplaces and schools, there's no month quite like December, when several joyous religious holidays collide with good intentions – creating a potentially toxic mix of misunderstandings and intolerance. Depending on the lunar calendar, any given December might include: Chanukah, Ramadan, Eid al-Adha or Diwali – in addition to Christmas.

Critical to understanding the rise in workplace tensions is the fact that the foreign-born population in the U.S. has more than doubled in the past 30 years – from 4.7% to over 11.1% – with more non-Christian immigrants coming from Asia and Africa than ever before, and far fewer coming from Europe.

But the U.S. (despite our ever-growing diversity) is still largely a nation of Christians. Approximately 80% of Americans identify themselves as Christians. So for many, it makes sense that as one of the most important dates on the Christian calendar approaches, decorations in workplaces and shops, office conversations, schools and even advertising, overwhelmingly focus on Christmas.

So what is the December Dilemma?

It is a phenomenon of the season that rears its head when employers, teachers, and advertisers overlook the many Americans who don't celebrate Christmas. Although 20% seems like a small percentage of the whole, it amounts to approximately 60 million people.

Some of these 60 million may want to see their own traditions represented and may feel excluded when that doesn't happen. According to a national survey conducted by the

Tanenbaum Center in 2001, Christian holidays are the only officially recognized holidays in a whopping 99% of America's workplaces.

What happens when a Muslim colleague wants to leave work a bit early the day before Eid to prepare for the festivities at home? Or a Buddhist colleague wants some time off on Bodhi Day for meditation? For many of the 60 million non-Christians, such accommodations are simply not on their boss' radar.

But non-Christians aren't the only ones who may be offended. On the flip side, some Christians may be distressed by what they see as the watering down of the holiday season for the sake of "political correctness." Calling the December office celebration a "Holiday Party" may seem like a minor accommodation designed to include those who are not Christian, but some experience it as hostility to Christmas and to Christianity.

The tensions are everywhere – in workplaces, public settings and schools, where attempts to secularize holiday pageants are met with both appreciation and rancor.

Despite the competing interests and simmering tensions, there are ways to tackle the December Dilemma. It may be impossible to please everyone, but there are definite steps that employers can take:

- Learn about the different holidays (at least the basics!), and understand their unique practices and significance. (Be sensitive, as well, to those who don't celebrate the December holidays – whether they are Jehovah's Witnesses or atheists.)
- In an office setting, seek the input of a religiously diverse group of employees to plan any holiday celebrations.
- Be proactive: Try establishing new traditions in your company or school by tapping the creativity of your colleagues and students to come up with inclusive practices.

Whatever they do, employers should not ignore the December Dilemma.

Silence doesn't necessarily mean employees aren't feeling isolated. About 2/3 of employees surveyed nationally by the Tanenbaum Center in 1999 identified at least one indicia of religious bias in the workplace. And 45% of them considered changing jobs because of it.

The Tanenbaum Center is a great resource on the December Dilemma. For more information, including data, expert advice, anecdotes or contact information for companies dealing with the issue, please contact Yasmin Hamidi at the Tanenbaum Center:

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