Seven steps for supporting Muslim employees during Ramadan

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By Jacob Clemente

Jacob here. When talking about diversity, equity and inclusion, faith-based accommodations are often overlooked. Less than half of Fortune 500 companies refer to or illustrate religion on their website’s diversity landing page, according to a 2022 study by the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation, a nonprofit educational organization. That same study found that only 7% of Fortune 500 companies publicly report having faith-oriented employee resource groups (ERGs).

So what can employers do to better support their employees during religious observances?

This year, for example, Ramadan is predicted to start around March 23 and end around April 21. (Ramadan is the month in which Muslims believe the Quran was first revealed to the prophet Muhammad.)

Participating Muslims “observe the month in gratitude to God by rereading or refamiliarizing themselves with the Quran and getting more intimate with God through fasting, improving their character, doing good works in charity, and by building community with others,” says Maha Elgenaidi, the founder and executive director of the Islamic Networks Group (ING), a peace-building and educational organization.

With Ramadan fast approaching, I spoke with Elgenaidi and Ashley Schwedt—the former director of inclusion, diversity, equity, and anti-bias at LifeLabs Learning—to learn how employers can support their Muslim employees during the month and beyond. Here’s what they told me.

“Incorporating faith in DEI work is a work in progress,” says Elgenaidi. “Companies tend to provide accommodations in things like food or holiday decorations, but not in areas that would substantively enhance the experience of the religious employees on the job.”

Schwedt says that the work required from companies with respect to their religious employees is the same work that’s required for any DEI initiative. Broadly, it involves understanding the needs of those employees and educating your workforce. “So for companies who are wondering [what they should do], I would say tap into what you already

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do,” says Schwedt. “What do you do for Pride Month? What do you do for Black History Month? And then think about how you can translate that into thinking about Ramadan.”

**Here's a checklist for you and your managers for supporting Muslim employees during Ramadan:**

1. **Educate yourself.**

   To better understand how you can support your Muslim employees during Ramadan, take time to understand the religious practices associated with the month. Elgenaidi explains that some of these practices include not eating or drinking during daylight hours throughout the month (if you’re able) and joining other Muslims at a mosque for Quran recitation at night.

   📖 **What to read**

   ING’s “Ramadan and Fasting” *slideshow* for more information about Ramadan and the practices associated with the month.

2. **Educate your employees.**

   Send an email to your employees, informing them of the month. This year, Ramadan, Passover, and Easter all overlap. Elgenaidi says if you’re worried about singling out one group over another, you could send employees one message about all three.

   👤 **What to say**

   Include a *description* of Ramadan.

   Include the Ramadan greeting, “Ramadan Mubarak.” (“Whether the person is fasting or not fasting, just getting that greeting is so cool…it shows that the person knows that it is their special time of year and they respect it and they appreciate it,” says Elgenaidi, who adds that it would be nice and appropriate for managers to say “Ramadan Mubarak” to individual Muslim employees, as well).

3. **Encourage employees to talk to their managers about necessary accommodations.**
Elgenaidi says that you shouldn’t ask individual employees if they’re fasting. Instead encourage your employees to talk to their managers directly about accommodations they need. This request can go into the general email informing staff about Ramadan.

4. Be flexible with work schedules.

"Fasting Muslims may want to have flexible work hours where they start and leave earlier than usual," explains Elgenaidi, who personally works from 7:00am-4:00pm—or 7:00am-3:00pm if she skips her lunch break—during Ramadan.

5. Be flexible with time off.

If people have to use their set number of vacation days for a religious event, that’s not equitable, says Schwedt. She encourages employers to have a pool of PTO days for religious holidays that doesn’t cut into their vacation time. This may be particularly important during the last 10 days of Ramadan, which is when Elgenaidi says practicing Muslims may request time off: “[The last 10 days are] considered to be especially spiritual because it's believed that the Quran was revealed to the prophet Muhammad 1400 years ago during the last 10 days of Ramadan.”

6. Avoid evening meetings.

Since fasting Muslims don’t eat or drink during daylight hours, they will need to break for a meal at sunset.

7. Dedicate a space for prayer.

If your employees work in person, it’s important to create a space for practicing Muslims to pray during Ramadan. Some companies already have dedicated meditation rooms that employees can use. If you don’t have one, consider dedicating a conference room for employees—“Just make sure that they’re not scheduled for meetings,” adds Elgenaidi.

Of course, your efforts to build an inclusive environment for Muslim employees should extend past Ramadan. Elgenaidi recommends organizations take the following steps:
What to do

Have written policies in place specifically for religious identities.

Educate your employees about the religious diversity of your workforce and about the religious practices of each group.

Consult Muslims on workplace considerations.

Provide a place for prayer and meditation year-round.

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