

Driving Hate Out of the Workplace

By Pamela Babcock March 9, 2010

From headline-grabbing stories of beatings, nooses and graffiti-scrawled lockers to subtle slights and social exclusion, situations involving discrimination, harassment and hate linked to religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability continue to occur in the workplace.

According to the FBI, 7,783 hate-related incidents were reported in 2008. Of that figure, 51.3 percent were tied to race, 19.5 to religion, 16.7 percent to sexual orientation, 11.5 percent to ethnicity/national origin bias and 1 percent to disability.

Of the hate crimes directed toward individuals, intimidation accounted for 48.8 percent, simple assaults for 32.1 percent and aggravated assaults for 18.5 percent. Seven hate-related murders were reported. However, most hate crimes occur in or near homes; on highways, roads or alleys; and at schools or colleges—not the workplace.

“When we talk about hate in the workplace, we’re really talking about a range of behaviors—some of which are very subtle and some of which are overt and easy to distinguish,” said Joyce S. Dubensky, executive vice president and CEO of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding in New York. “And they can all be relevant from an HR perspective because they impact morale and productivity negatively.

“Hate crimes are an indicator of extreme but real societal trends and attitudes,” Dubensky said. “They are the extreme manifestation of what starts as ignorance and bias then becomes hatred and prejudice. The way it manifests in the workplace is often with discrimination and, with some people, violence.”

“These acts are underreported, and they are hard to estimate,” said Douglas A. Hicks, professor of leadership studies and religion at the University of Richmond's Jepson School of Leadership Studies.

Hicks, a Presbyterian minister and author of *Religion and the Workplace* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), said HR needs a multifaceted approach, “from creating a culture of respectful pluralism,” including developing strategies to prevent discrimination and hate and addressing incidents when they occur.

Religious Bias

“It’s especially critical to address religious-based hatred because it’s so core to many people's identity and so devastating when it occurs,” said Dubensky.

She said that about 3,400 religious bias charges were filed with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in 2009, up from just over 1,800 in 1999.

The 2008 FBI hate-crime report documented more than 1,519 religion-based hate crimes, with more than 66 percent directed against Jews and Jewish institutions.

And in 2008, while anti-Muslim hate crimes in the U.S. decreased, incidents of bias increased, according to a December 2009 annual report by the Washington, D.C.-based Council on American-Islamic Relations. A total of 2,728 bias reports were filed with the organization in 2008, up 11 percent over 2006.

“Pre-9/11, we were more homogeneous as a country and we were less overt about religious differences and religious bias in the workplace,” Dubensky explained. “It isn’t that it wasn’t there—it was just undercover.”

Yet many believers and nonbelievers no longer wish to hide their point of view.

Beginning in late 2008, an atheist group drew the ire of believers when it ran advertisements on London buses that read, “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” And in Washington, D.C., in late 2009, the American Humanist Association ran ads in major newspapers and on buses proclaiming, “Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness’ sake.”

One Blogger’s View

Pagan blogger Jason Pitzl-Waters of Eugene, Ore., said he thinks that employers have become more tolerant and accommodating of religious minorities over the past decade and that most incidents involving outright discrimination involve “rogue managers and employees acting against the policies of their employer.”

Pitzl-Waters said he thinks there has been a net decrease in workplace discrimination against Pagans and that cases that do arise gain more attention and action thanks to the Internet.

In October 2008, for example, Wiccan James Bara, a Google employee, filed suit in U.S. District Court in Atlanta claiming that his faith had been mocked. He was ultimately fired after he came to the defense of a female transgender employee.

Pitzl-Waters said most workplace problems stem from religious individuals who believe Paganism to be “inherently sinful, evil or decadent,” while a smaller number rise from more secular bosses or supervisors who don’t believe that Pagan faiths are “real” religions and, as such, aren’t afforded the same protections as Christianity, Judaism and other mainstream faith traditions.

The LGBT Experience

While there has been a concerted effort over the past decade to institute policies and procedures to treat lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) employees fairly in terms of benefits and opportunity, “the culture in the workplace has been much slower to change,” said Daryl Herrschaft, director of the Human Rights Commission (HRC) Workplace project.

In a 2008 survey of LGBT individuals conducted by HRC, a slight majority—51 percent —said they're not out in the workplace or are open about their sexual orientation to only a few people. A total of 13 percent said they feared for their personal safety, although that figure rose to 40 percent for transgendered people. Meanwhile, 62 percent reported that they hear negative comments or derogatory jokes about minority groups—not just LGBT individuals, “at least once in a while.”

Exploring Causes

Sondra Thiederman, a San Diego-based author of *Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace* (Kaplan Publishing, 2008), said fear is the underlying cause of most workplace hate and distrust. For example, taken to the extreme, fear might lead someone to commit a hate crime against a Muslim person who they wrongly believe might be a terrorist.

But in most cases, she added, the fear is less physical and more emotional or cultural because the perpetrator fears that the other group or its behaviors and or beliefs “is questioning or challenging their own way of looking at the world and conducting their lives.”

Thiederman said hidden biases can leak out in “tiny acts and dismissive words.” Such “leakage” incidents or “microinequities” are difficult to spot and, thereby, harder to fix than more blatant cases that are witnessed, where a perpetrator is identified and action is taken, she said.

Diversity expert Alice Adams, vice president of Common Ground Consulting in Farmington, Maine, and author of *Playing to Strength: Leveraging Gender at Work* (Praeger, 2009), said the insider-outsider dynamic in some workplaces can be polarizing and sometimes can feel like hate.

“A smile that doesn't reach the eyes, a cool greeting, a sudden change in the conversation when the minority person arrives—all these are common and very powerful in insider/outside dynamics,” Adams said.

Although usually unacknowledged, such gestures are “reliable signs of contempt” that interfere with working relationships and ultimately make it difficult for the prejudiced “insider” and designated “outsider” to be fully productive, she added.

Taking Action

"Hate in the workplace ultimately has a bottom line consequence to business," Dubensky said. "If your goal is to be the most productive business that draws and retains the best talent, then it's in your interest to address hatred."

Diversity practitioner Judith Kaye, an attorney and president of [Judith Kaye Training & Consulting](#) in Providence, R.I., who has worked with LGBT groups at organizations, said that to identify subtle signs of hate, good managers should have “face time” with employees on a regular basis and ask open-ended questions about the workplace.

And they should listen for rumors about particular employees and watch for an increase in jokes or cartoons making the rounds on e-mail or bulletin boards. “Those are some of the things I’d use as a barometer,” Kaye said.

Herrschaft said an organization’s leadership can help set the tone by “having the CEO take time to meet with constituents to talk about respect for each other using specific words and not in the abstract.”

Herrschaft said organizations shouldn’t “assume that there aren’t problems. There likely are, but they probably aren’t making it to your desk.” For example, when HRC asked survey respondents what they do when they hear an anti-LGBT comment, only 5 percent said they report it to HR or their manager.

Because hate incidents often are underreported, it’s difficult to say if hate has been increasing or decreasing, said Molly Pepper, an associate professor of management at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash.

But she said recent literature on incivility in the workplace suggests that “workplace tensions are rising” and that much of the “selective incivility” in the workplace is a veiled manifestation of sexism and racism.

Pepper said denial is another problem. “Because we now have laws forbidding discrimination and harassment, many people believe [that hate in the workplace] does not happen anymore or, if it does happen, that there is a fair system for stopping it.” She noted, however, that sexual orientation is not a federally protected class, leaving LGBT individuals with little legal protection against acts of hate.

Kaye said companies should tie steps to combat hate in the workplace with existing policies of professionalism and fair treatment. “Policies always should go further than the law,” she said. “You don’t have to have something rise to the level of discrimination or harassment to still nip it in the bud.”

Awareness training, education and time spent with individuals from the target group can help minimize bias and hate because “the more we know people as individuals, the more we begin to identify what we share, the less we fear and the less hate we have,” Thiederman said.

Pamela Babcock is a freelance writer based in the New York City area.