

1.6.22: Religion

Learning Objectives

- Discuss how cultural differences among individuals from different religions may influence communication



Religion is an area steeped in tradition and conventions, and is, therefore, fraught with potential for error for the uninitiated. For example, in the summer of 1977, Nike launched a Summer Hoops campaign to introduce a line of basketball shoes with an air logo based on stylized letters with flame detailing. When the shoes went into distribution in Saudi Arabia, the logo was questioned and modified, but not enough to avoid a backlash.

At issue: the logo was perceived to resemble the Arabic word for Allah, or God, and some Muslims considered the association with shoes specifically to be disrespectful. Facing a global Muslim boycott, Nike recalled the shoes in distribution and agreed to discontinue sales. As reported by Caryle Murphy for the *Washington Post*, “Nike’s action came after weeks of negotiations with the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), an Islamic advocacy group that had threatened to urge a boycott of Nike products by the world’s 1 billion Muslims.”^[1] A chastised Nike spokesperson acknowledged, “Our company has to be more vigilant and work more with communities on issues of sensitivity.”

Fear or apprehension of the unknown is a large contributor to inadvertently creating communication barriers. This is especially common when faced with new or different spiritual beliefs and practices. Sometimes, a person may feel uncomfortable communicating with people from other religions because of assumptions about the other’s beliefs and opinions. One main communication barrier stemming from religion is individuals’ lack of knowledge or information about other religions and belief systems.

Due to the extensive variations in religious and spiritual beliefs, people who identify as religious or spiritual may have vastly different ideas and opinions about what constitutes appropriate life practices and behaviors. These beliefs, or discrepancy between beliefs, can impact how people communicate with one another. These beliefs include the following:

- Beliefs about what topics are appropriate to talk about
- Beliefs about what amount of physical touch by non-family members is appropriate
- Beliefs regarding what is considered appropriate clothing (this can include head coverings, wearing form fitting uniforms, etc.)
- Beliefs about time off from work to attend religious gatherings
- Beliefs about breaks for rituals, such as prayer at certain times of the day or needing a specific day off each week to go to a spiritual gathering place like a temple, mosque, or church
- Beliefs about food allowances including, but not limited to, consumption of alcohol, caffeine, cigarettes, meat or specific types of meat, and going without food or fasting for specific periods of time
- Beliefs about the role of family in personal, social, or work life

Depending on religious background, people with different spiritual beliefs and practices may approach public communication in a work setting differently as well. Here are a few language specific areas to be aware of:

- What topics may be referred to in a humorous or flippant way
- Specific words or phrases that may be prohibited, such as saying the name of a deity in an irreverent manner
- Different connotations of religious terminology or jargon
- Unfamiliar or new religious terminology and vocabulary
- Use of religiously approved communication methods. For example, some religious factions may dissuade the use of social media as a means to preserve one’s modesty, to prevent access to material that would lead to impure thoughts, or to avoid potentially inappropriate conversations between non-married or unrelated individuals

If you are worried about contributing to a communication barrier or if you notice a breakdown in communication in the workplace, the way you approach it can make all of the difference. Above all, approach the situation or individual(s) with empathy, curiosity, and respect. Ask questions, define terms that are unfamiliar or understood differently, use clear language with neutral terminology, avoid jargon, and avoid judgment. Taking the time and effort to listen and learn about other's spiritual beliefs can help facilitate more open and effective communication channels.

1. Murphy, Caryle. "Nike Pulls Shoes that Irked Muslims." *The Washington Post*, 25 Jun 1997. Web. 26 June 2018.

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