



What is the Accommodation Mindset?

The “Accommodation Mindset,” a term we use at Tanenbaum to illustrate the process of accommodating a diverse workforce, is a starting point in shifting your attitude towards diversity initiatives. Managers who have a more complete understanding of the benefits that come from diversity initiatives can begin to approach the incidents and conflicts that arise in their diverse employee populations as opportunities to create a more comfortable work environment for your employees. Starting with a positive attitude opens the door to move beyond accommodating your workforce, and can help companies (and individuals) get ahead of the curve.

The Eight Steps to the Accommodation Mindset

1. Get the Facts

There are many demographic trends in the United States that may be relevant to religion in the workplace:

- **Immigration:** There are many new immigrants in the United States. In the past, most immigrants came from Europe. Now, most come from Asia, Africa and Latin America.
- **The diversity within traditions:** According to a Center for Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminar, there are approximately 41,000 Christian denominations in the world – and that’s Christianity alone. Each individual, regardless of how they identify, will believe and practice differently.
- **The increase in unaffiliated adults:** According to a 2012 Pew study entitled “Nones on the Rise,” 20% of Americans identify as “unaffiliated” (atheist, agnostic, nothing in particular). However, out of the unaffiliated population, 68% say they believe in God, and 21% say they pray daily.
- **The fluidity of religious diversity:** According to a 2011 Pew study entitled “Faith in Flux,” about half of Americans have changed their faith at least once in their lives.

Understanding this diversity within and among traditions is paramount. When an employee comes to you with a request, it is important to keep these statistics in mind. In situations where you are addressing a specific accommodation request, it is a better practice to research your policies and practices first and come prepared to discuss unfamiliar religious traditions and practices. However, always remember that this is just a starting place for learning more about the individuals’ practice. Never allow your experiences to devolve into stereotypes (e.g. all Muslim women wear headscarves).

2. Recognize All Employees’ Needs

Tanenbaum’s recently released *Survey of American Workers and Religion*, a representative survey of over 2,000 American workers, found that:

- One-third of respondents have seen or personally experienced incidents of religious bias in their workplaces.
- Half of non-Christians say that their employers are ignoring their religious needs.

- More than half of American workers believe that there is a lot of discrimination against Muslims.
- Nearly 6-in-10 atheists believe that people look down on their beliefs, as do nearly one-third of white evangelical Protestants and non-Christian religious workers.

These statistics show that the accommodation mindset can be important to people of all faiths and none, from the man who is a white evangelical Protestant to the woman who is atheist or to others who follow a minority belief tradition in the U.S.

Therefore, all employees, regardless of how they identify, may require an accommodation of some kind. It is important to understand that there is no “one-size-fits-all” accommodation. Never dismiss an employees’ complaint or request and always address the needs of individual employees (not groups of employees).

3. Ask Respectful Questions

Providing religious accommodations for employees is a two way street in which employees and employers work together to find practical and sustainable solutions. In the best case scenario, employees will provide a manager or employer with information about their sincerely held religious, ethical, or moral belief, the conflict in question, and their specific request. However, not all employees have the necessary communication skills or comfort level discussing this topic to execute a request in such a manner. It is your job to ask employees respectful questions to find out more about the employee’s practice, belief, and an accommodation solution that will not cause the employer an undue hardship and will provide the employee with the accommodation they require.

4. Identify Any Limitations

Providing religious accommodations can sometimes be difficult, especially when the employee belongs to a small department, works in a role which requires 24/7 customer service, or when the request involves union or other restricting contracts, for instance. It is possible that the employee is requesting something that would impose an undue hardship on the company. Factors relevant to undue hardship may include the type of workplace, the nature of the employee’s duties, the identifiable cost of the accommodation in relation to the size and operating cost of the company/workplace, and the number of employees who will in fact need a particular accommodation. Costs to be considered include not only direct monetary costs but also the burden on the conduct of the employer’s business. However, even if you believe an accommodation would create an undue hardship, **DO NOT** deny a request for religious accommodation without first collaborating with all necessary offices (Human Resources, Employee Relations, Equal Employment Opportunity, and/or Legal Departments) and exploring all other options.

5. Be Creative

When an employee requests a religious accommodation, it is important to think creatively about ways that both the needs of the employee and the needs of the company can be met. Not only is there a good chance that a compromise can be found, but even if one isn't, this shows that the employer made a good faith effort to accommodate.

6. Communicate

The mere existence of a written policy on religion, in itself, reduces the perception of bias in the workplace and improves employee satisfaction. But the implementation of these written nondiscrimination policies covering religion, religious expression, and religious accommodation is just as important. Enforce them, and communicate them to employees.

7. Educate

Tensions often arise around religious difference due to a lack of information or the presence of misinformation. Be prepared. Provide employees with resources that can give them more information about each other's religions. Americans don't know much about others' religions. Tanenbaum offers excellent resources on its website, which can be found here: <https://tanenbaum.org/programs/workplace/workplace-resources/>

8. Institutionalize

Managers, human resource practitioners, and employees often identify practical and creative solutions for providing accommodations for employees. It is likely that future (or even current) employees across all traditions would benefit from such accommodations. However, all too often, these accommodations are not shared institutionally and are therefore not leveraged appropriately. This results in future employees having to unnecessarily jump through hoops to be accommodated, time lost and sometimes money wasted. Sharing about the successful accommodations you've encountered is crucial for creating inclusive work environments today and in the future. Consider creating an internal resource for Human Resource practitioners and high-level management where successful practices can be recorded and tracked.