

Tips from a Pro on Reducing Conflict Over Corporate Diversity Issues

By TJ DeGroat
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Corporate America is a microcosm of the real world, so stress and unease surrounding the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the war with Iraq and the sorry state of the economy is likely to prompt increased levels of prejudice and intolerance in the workplace. Managers should be on the lookout for a variety of diversity issues to bubble up.

"Increased external stressors like the war and the economy will definitely lead to conflicts over seemingly minor things," said Gregg Ward, president and co-founder of Orlando-Ward & Associates, a San Diego-based diversity trainer. "When the going gets tough, people get tough on each other."

Ward offers advice on how to handle a variety of diversity-related scenarios that could arise in the office.

Q. A manager needs to meet numbers in a tough market, but numerous employees are asking to take time off to visit their families.

"These days, people are re-establishing their priorities," Ward said. "An employee who normally wouldn't ask for time off may start requesting it. Others might come in late or leave early."

"There will be a ton of work/life conflicts to cope with, but managers should show ultimate flexibility. If they cooperate, employees will be loyal."

Q. I have a man and a woman at the same level in my firm. Neither is performing up to my expectations. Now management is looking to cut my department. I don't have to think twice about terminating the man's employment. But if I fire the woman, am I going to get hit with a lawsuit for wrongful termination?

"Everything is subjective, it is all perception, so a wise manager will gather information,"

Ward said. "The only way to protect yourself is to have done the appropriate paperwork. Most decent-sized companies have professional-development plans. They're supposed to do annual reviews. They must take it seriously. Documentation, even if it's a hand-written note, will bolster decisions to terminate someone."

Q. The Indian employees are always cooking smelly food in the office microwave. I can't work or even think when they do that.

"Ethnic food or even specific religious holidays often cause complaints," Ward said. "People say, 'We're laying off a lot of people, but so-and-so is taking off for Rosh Hashanah. Who do they think they are?'"

"Muslims have to pray during work hours, so some companies set up prayer rooms, annoying some employees. You're definitely going to see more expressions of intolerance, especially in field environments."

"Managers must keep the lines of communication open and show tolerance. They must be shining examples of the diversity practices their company wants employees to follow."

Q. A lot of colleagues are becoming team leaders without getting a pay raise or a new title. Because they may be most knowledgeable about the technical tool, they are put in positions without any training. Now, with the economy, they're under enormous pressure and fall into very negative habits.

"Any good manager needs to be looking out for good team leaders. It's time for managers to move beyond managing and become good coaches," Ward said. "No matter how busy things are, there is always time to help an employee become better at their job. Without the proper training and skills, they could bring the entire company down."

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