Holiday Etiquette

Thoughts on how to be festive, respectful and inclusive in the workplace as the end of another calendar year approaches.

Office for Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives
Michigan State University
This is the time of year when our campus begins to add decorative touches to our offices, residence halls and outdoor spaces. It is also a time to be considerate of those who have different beliefs and perspectives with regard to the holiday season. Please be mindful that MSU is a global university with a montage of beliefs and religious persuasions.

Here are a few suggestions on how to celebrate inclusively:

**Party Etiquette:**

- Having a “holiday party,” as opposed to a Christmas party, takes into consideration the fact that during this time of year fellow Spartans may be celebrating more than just the Christmas holiday.

- It is also important to recognize that some religions, like Jehovah’s Witnesses, don’t celebrate any winter holidays. So simply having an end of the year celebration, such as “Happy 2010” could be an inclusive alternative.

**Deck the Halls:**

- Keep decorations as seasonal as possible.

- Using terms like “Best Wishes in the New Year” and “Happy Holidays” keeps the focus on the season and less on a particular holiday or religion.

- Putting together an multi-faith team to plan and coordinate events and decorations may generate a multitude of ideas (although one should be careful about making assumptions about someone’s faith). Note that in some cases a multi-faith display may be appropriate. In other cases, forgoing decorations or using strictly seasonal decorations may be more acceptable.
Related laws and policies:

- As a public institution, MSU is constitutionally prohibited from favoring one religion over another. In addition, MSU is prohibited from advancing religion or engaging in government entanglement with religion. Thus, a display that could be viewed as an official MSU endorsement of any specific religion could be problematic. Please consult with the Office of Inclusion if you have questions about this obligation.

- The Anti-Discrimination Policy (ADP) prohibits discrimination and harassment in the workplace based on religion. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Michigan Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act do as well. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has opined that displaying certain holiday decorations, even if they are religious based, does not violate the Act. Nor is there an affirmative obligation to forgo a holiday related display or to create a specific balance of items displayed. We encourage all, however, to be respectful of differences, as set forth above, in alignment with MSU’s core value of inclusion.

- Please be aware that the ADP, as well as related laws, includes an affirmative obligation to accommodate religious beliefs in the workplace in certain circumstances. Please consult with the Office for Inclusion if you have questions regarding specific requests you receive from employees.