Chapter 13

Religious Diversity and Technology: Traditional Enemies Made Friends for Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Religious and humanist identity and values, although often invisible, may affect (a) job performance, (b) conduct, and (c) organizational commitment. A 2009 research survey of active-duty service members in the U.S. armed forces investigated religious and humanist identification and values; results revealed areas that may significantly affect a leader’s ability to successfully exercise command. A military leader’s diversity management plan cannot be effective without a means of discerning, then understanding implications to the military mission of religious/humanist beliefs/values present among personnel. This chapter explores the benefits of survey technology in providing military leaders with needed information, implications for leadership policy and future research areas.

INTRODUCTION

Religious faith and technology are often thought to be mortal enemies. Yet when considered within the parameters of diversity management, these two phenomena may, in fact, be best friends. In this chapter we examine the role religion plays in a comprehensive diversity management plan and demonstrate the usefulness technology in supporting belief/practice needs, assisting leadership in making informed decisions, and maximizing contributions from all personnel involved while realizing mission objectives.

According to social science research, religious identity and values comprise essential components in the lives of many individuals and groups. This
remains true even as increasing numbers of individuals reject the majority religious identity in the United States—Christianity, in its myriad forms—and embrace non-traditional religious systems or identify as having no religious beliefs. Although more than 80% of the U.S. population embraces some form of religious faith, non-believers (a broad group that includes atheists and agnostics and which is described herein as Humanist) form their individual identity and establish personal and professional values in conjunction with the majority system, even if their individual reaction to religious belief is one of rejection (Kosmin & Keysar, 2008; Pew, 2008). We contend, therefore, that the rise of non-traditional faith and humanist expressions validates the importance of carefully exploring and identifying the belief systems of all organizational members.

The need to explore and understand religious/humanist identity and values, and their effect on behavior receives further impetus from the fact that, unlike other aspects of diversity (e.g., race, gender, nationality, ability, and age), religious and humanist identities usually are not immediately apparent, nor necessarily known to others via non-intrusive means. Yet, however difficult to discern, religious/humanist identity have been shown to affect not only an individual’s personal outlook and contributions made to the organization, but the individual’s ability to interact and cooperate with others within the organization (Clair, et al., 2005).

Within a bureaucratic organization such as the military, however, inquiries concerning personal religious identity and religious values may evoke feelings of discomfort, suspicion, and even offense. Intelligent use of survey technology thus becomes a critical and useful tool that allows religious diversity data to be gathered in confidence, ameliorating or eliminating suspicions, and allowing leaders and researchers to explore the effects of this diversity. To illustrate the interaction of religious/humanist characteristics with other personal and community attributes and their implications we use results from the Religious Identification and Practices Survey (RIPS), conducted among over 6,000 active-duty personnel in the U.S. armed forces in 2009.

BACKGROUN

Religion, which in part comprises the individual and societal human response to the divine, in all its complexity and variety (Otto, 1923), exists as an integral, even primary, cultural element and a leading source of personal and collective identity (Geertz, 1973; Bellah, 2006). The last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first have afforded U.S. citizens – and members of the U.S. armed forces – evidence of the power of religious and humanist belief, adherence, practice, and allegiance in national, international, and local circumstances. In the shocked aftermath of the 11 September 2001 bombings, religious rhetoric was used to inform American public opinion as the Bush administration engaged in militaristic moves, helping to “shape American responses toward both the issues of Iraqi disarmament and an invasion of Iraq” (Smidt, 2005, p. 260).

Within the military, religion acts as an institutional source of power, strength, insight, and confusion depending on the context and the manner in which it is embraced by leaders and subordinates. For those in uniform, thrust into the maelstrom of two violent wars, religion was called upon to play three prominent, visible roles. President Bush employed religious rhetoric to inspire and motivate all who would hear his words. Standing on the deck of the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, Bush announced to the ship’s sailors and Marines (and, by means of media, to all military personnel and the nation): “[W]herever you go, you carry a message of hope, a message that is ancient and ever new. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “To the captives, come out; and to those in darkness,
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