

Figuring out the holiday season

Employers should tread carefully and be inclusive, say experts

BY MARCEL VANDER WIER

IMMORTALIZED in song as the “most wonderful time of the year,” in actuality the Christmas season can be a difficult scenario for employers to navigate through.

“The whole holiday season is a bit of a minefield,” said Stuart Rudner, employment lawyer at Toronto’s Rudner MacDonald. “Whether it’s allegations that you’re disrespecting some people by not acknowledging their holidays, or the holiday party itself... a lot of organizations have learned from other people’s mistakes.”

Holding staff parties in late December can be used to celebrate organizational accomplishments and the hard work employees have logged throughout the year. Yet, troubles remain in terms of office etiquette surrounding Christmas decorations, toy drives or employee gift exchanges.

So, what is the best practice for organizations?

“There is no formula,” said Joenita Paulrajan, program manager at the University of British Columbia’s Centre for Intercultural Communication in Vancouver. “What works for one team, unit or organization may not work for another.”

“The way we see it — this is an opportunity. It’s not just to check a box and say, ‘We did a toy drive.’ But, rather, this is an opportunity. ‘Let’s get together as a team. Let’s try to grow our culture of belonging.’”

Inclusivity favoured

Corporate holiday traditions vary in Canada, depending on geographic location, said Pierre Battah, a management consultant specializing in human resources in Moncton, N.B.

Companies typically fall into three categories, he said: Christmas traditionalists, holiday inclusionists, and those migrating back to the traditional Christmas party.

“This is about being representa-

tive to your audience,” said Battah. “Best practice is to be representative of your people. Employers should be sensitive and appropriate to the makeup of their staff.”

“Some employers were never quite concerned with ‘de-Christmas-ing’ their events,” he said, and an end-of-year celebration on Prince Edward Island, for example, would likely be a traditional Christmas gathering — which is acceptable if the workforce is unicultural.

Meanwhile, organizations in major urban centres favouring inclusivity have moved to a more secular holiday atmosphere, hosting year-end celebrations that focus on collaborative volunteer work rather than gifts or service awards, said Battah.

While not necessarily “all Christmas, all the time,” the third group includes those who have once again set up a Christmas tree after leaving it in the box for the past few years, he said.

People are becoming more comfortable with acknowledging multiple religious holidays, rather than excluding “Merry Christmas” greetings and decorations altogether, said Simma Lieberman, a San Francisco-based diversity consultant.

“It’s important for people to understand that not everybody celebrates Christmas and that there are other holidays,” she said. “On the other hand, what I tell people now is: ‘If you don’t celebrate Christmas and someone says ‘Merry Christmas,’ say ‘Merry Christmas’ back. Don’t freak out.’”

Alongside employee diversity, clients and customers should also be taken into account when decorating the office for the holidays, said Paulrajan.

“How do we make spaces inclusive and multicultural? When it comes to religious and cultural traditions, that’s the question we

have to be asking,” she said. “There are so many layers to diversity and inclusion; there is no point where you’ve arrived. You cannot have the perfect Christmas tree that shows everybody’s religious traditions or captures all of the different views, but we always have to keep taking it a step further.”

There’s still a lot of work that needs to be done when it comes to inclusion, said Paulrajan. “Our communities are becoming more and more multicultural and, at the same time, we also see pushback. We haven’t turned the corner yet.”

Best practices

Organizational best practice would be greeting all employees on major religious holidays of their choosing, such as Hanukkah or Kwanzaa, rather than Christmas alone, said Lieberman.

And whenever possible, companies should avoid holiday parties, toy drives and gift exchanges in favour of a New Year’s party recognizing organizational accomplishments, she said.

If corporate culture is aligned with community charities year-round, a toy drive makes sense, said Lieberman. But interoffice gift exchanges should be a non-starter as individuals’ specific economic situations are unknown and employees could face unnecessary hardship as a result.

“In the workplace, it’s inappropriate,” she said. “People don’t need the workplace to do a gift exchange or a toy drive for Christmas. They can do that outside of work. There’s other things they can do inside of work.”

Let staff decide

Turning the celebratory specifics over to staff could be a wise move for managers, said Battah.

“This is a big deal for employees. If staff comes and says, ‘Look, we

want this to be more inclusive, less Christmas,’ then that’s probably right for your place of business,” he said. “I would be sensitive to that in terms of a guiding principle.”

Allowing employees to chime in shows organizational respect — a success in itself, said Rudner.

“Like a lot of things in employment law, it comes down to common sense and respect,” he said. “If you have people in your workplace that celebrate holidays other than Christmas, then don’t just make it a Christmas party. If you have a multicultural workplace, or if you’re not sure how various groups would celebrate the holidays, ask them.”

“There’s nothing wrong with having a Christmas tree and there’s certainly nothing wrong with having a toy drive,” said Rudner. “If you have an entirely unidimensional, unicultural workplace and everyone celebrates Christmas, then celebrate Christmas. You don’t have to have a multicultural party even though everyone is Christian.”

While inclusivity is widely regarded as best practice in Canada, it is not unlawful to hold a Christmas party that does not recognize other major religious holidays, he said. However, employers do have a duty to accommodate employees’ preferred religious holidays with time off, unless undue hardship exists.

Despite the tricky nature of it, successfully navigating through the holiday season remains a worthwhile venture for organizations, said Rudner.

“The holiday party is still a great idea,” he said.

“It’s a great time to build teamwork and social relationships. Everyone wants to be the employer of choice, and that means sometimes you relax and let people have some fun. But there is certainly some risk there, so it’s got to be done properly.”