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Many employers are weaving religion and spirituality into company cultures. The push may come from bosses or the rank and file—and their motivations vary. Either way, when religion and spirituality cross the threshold, they result in daunting legal and managerial challenges along with perceived benefits.

By Robert J. Grossman

Bob Pettus spent his entire career with Charlotte, N.C.-based Coca-Cola Bottling Co. Consolidated —all with top-level human resource responsibility. Like an Israelite wandering in the Sinai seeking the Promised Land, he engaged in a quest—to find the keys to attracting and retaining high-performing workers and managers. After decades in the wilderness, he was losing heart.

“Our employees’ salaries, benefits and perks were always a little bit ahead of others so we could attract the kinds of employees we needed,” recalls the HR veteran, who retired in 2005 as vice chairman of the nation’s second-largest Coca-Cola bottler with 5,800 employees in 11 Southeastern states. “I would get all excited about giving everyone a 3.5 percent increase, putting in a new insurance policy, adding a new holiday. But when I made the announcements, there was hardly any response except, ‘Hey, that’s what everyone else is doing. You guys should have been doing this a long time ago.’ We spent all those millions, and all we got for it was ‘ho-hum.’”

Then Pettus—who now consults for the company—saw the light. He was meeting the physical and emotional needs of workers, but what about the spiritual? Did it make sense to keep religion under wraps and require people to leave their faith at the doorstep? Equally important, if leaders really believed in running the business in concert with God and religious values, shouldn’t they say so?

Pettus knew company leaders who answer affirmatively buck convention: Most business leaders are faith-frosty, convinced that the less religious expression at work, the better. They comply with legal mandates and accommodate individuals who require special arrangements, but go no further.

The U.S. educational system and other teachings “say you should compartmentalize faith,” Pettus says. “Folks who are willing to talk about their faith and live it out Monday through Friday often are viewed as fanatical. Someone can go to a football game and scream and holler, throw things in the air and dress like a slob. But at work, if you mention that you should love one another and live right every day—it’s like, ‘What’s wrong with you?’”

Pettus took a stand. Working with the chief executive officer, he drafted a mission and values statement that makes it clear company leaders embrace and honor God. It opens the door to spirituality for all employees and champions stewardship. The statement leads with “Our Values Honor God.”

Finally, an initiative that was met with an overwhelming positive reaction. When people learn they can live out their faith, Pettus says, “There’s this loyalty, this willingness to go the extra mile.”

Faith Focus

Coca-Cola Bottling Co. Consolidated represents one of many faith-focused U.S. companies. These organizations proactively conduct business in a manner that embraces the faiths of leaders or owners. Their faiths provide underlying values that motivate and guide the organizations. A few, such as Coca-Cola Bottling, are publicly traded. Many more—such as Austaco Ltd., a privately owned Taco Bell franchisee with 1,800 workers in Austin, Texas—number among the nation’s small and medium-sized and frequently family-owned businesses.

“We classify ourselves as a Christian company—Christ- or God-centered,” says Don Barton, Austaco’s HR vice president. “We do things like say grace when we have a meal, something a typical company might not do. The employees know that our CEO, Dirk Dozier, is open about sharing his Christian faith in personal testimony. Our motto is to serve, which includes serving our employees on a spiritual basis.”

The Biltmore Co.

Ann Ashley, senior vice president of HR at The Biltmore Corp. in Asheville, N.C., is quick to explain what her decision to install a chaplaincy is about—and not about: “It’s not about religion; it is about the hospitality business. We’re a secular, for-profit business that seeks to do the right thing. We have a set of core values that promotes caring for each other and our guests on the estate. You have to take care of things that weigh on them. It may be physical, emotional or spiritual.” The company is in tourism, running an historic mansion, a hotel and a winery.

When Ashley brought in chaplains, Biltmore, once a small family operation, had grown to more than 1,800 employees. The company was losing the personal touch that had characterized its relationship with workers. “How do you keep the smallness? How do you assure that someone notices if you’re having a bad day?” she asked.

The employee assistance program (EAP), still in place, was excellent, but people in need weren’t calling.

Biltmore turned to Marketplace Chaplains USA in Dallas, a not-for-profit, faith-based organization that helps employers reach out to workers. Modeled after the chaplaincy of the U.S. Army. Today, 2,500 chaplains serve 402 employers with more than 500,000 workers. Ashley signed on with Marketplace Chaplains USA for a three-year pilot.

Among the metrics she has set to gauge success are the following:

--**Turnover rate.** Are fewer people indicating dissatisfaction as a reason for leaving in exit interviews?

--**Sick or emergency leave.** Is the company spending less?

--**Employee surveys.** Are satisfaction percentages trending up?

--**EAP utilization.** Are more people taking advantage of the EAP program?

--**Foundation applications.** Are more people taking advantage of assistance grants?

Ashley examined the field of chaplain services before choosing the international Marketplace Chaplains. “It gives me comfort to know that when an employee has a death in the family in another part of the country or even overseas, a chaplain has been there almost immediately.”

Pilgrim’s Pride

Pilgrim’s Pride has about 300 chaplains from Marketplace Chaplains working at chicken and deli-food plants in the United States, Mexico and Puerto Rico.

“The chaplains are faith-based, but in their contract, they have to reach out when employees request spiritual guidance from a representative of a different religion,” says Jane Brookshire, executive vice president of Pilgrim’s Pride Corp. in Pittsburg, Texas. “We’re able to mirror the diversity we have in our own workforce—female chaplains, chaplains of various ethnic backgrounds—they try to make sure at least one person who visits a site is someone every employee can identify with.”

Brookshire says the 24/7 availability of the chaplains and their constant presence in the facilities is invaluable. “It has been very helpful to have the chaplains available in times of tragedy,” she says. When a worker’s parent dies, the chaplain goes to the funeral. “It shows,” she says, “how much the company cares about our employees.”