



Being an inclusive workplace used to mean sending out secular Happy Holidays greeting cards and changing the name of office Christmas parties to “festive gatherings” or “holiday get-togethers.” In an effort to be culturally sensitive, diversity working groups felt it best to remove any blatant references to Christmas by doing away with the tree and Santa décor.

“In our effort to be inclusive, a lot of workplaces stopped celebrating events all together and avoided putting up any [holiday] décor,” says diversity specialist Ritu Bhasin, founder of Bhasin Consulting Inc.

Today, however, workplace diversity coaches are encouraging companies to use the holiday season to build greater awareness and understanding of each other’s cultures. “It’s not about asking or expecting people who have certain traditions or values to drop those. It’s about how do you maintain those at the same time as enriching them through the participation of other activities or decorations that are symbolic

Bring down the tree?

Hosting an inclusive holiday party is a matter of adding, not taking away

By Lisa Evans

[of other cultures]?” says Jennifer Lynn, executive coach at Diversity Advantage International.

Annual office holiday parties are also valuable in that they can provide terrific opportunities to step back from the day-to-day task-based interactions and deepen social bonds among co-workers.

The issue with the annual Christmas party, says Bhasin, is not the word “Christmas” in the title, but the way that other cultural celebrations are handled. “I don’t have an issue with calling a party a Christmas party if, during the rest of the year, the office hosts other festivities to celebrate Diwali or Chinese New Year or Eid,” she says. Of course, in an office with employees representing a dozen or so cultures, monthly

celebrations may not be possible. In that case, Bhasin and Lynn say, an end-of-the-year bash that incorporates all cultures represented in the office may be a nice idea.

To spice up your office’s holiday celebration, try adding inclusive activities to your festivities. For example, you could incorporate decorations or Christmas tree ornaments representing everyone’s heritage. Or you could encourage your employees to play DJ; sure, “Jingle Bells” and “Frosty the Snowman” are must-haves on any holiday playlist, but it could be fun to include holiday songs from other cultures in the mix.

And let’s not forget about food. Nima Noori, CEO and founder of the Toronto-based company TorontoVaporizer, knows food is

the key ingredient in any festivity, which is why he has made it the focus of his company’s holiday party.

When Noori first immigrated to Canada as an international student from Iran, he was invited to a traditional office holiday party. “There was a tree, cinnamon coffees and we all went to the CEO’s house and had dinner there,” he says. “But I felt I had to learn more about [Canadian Christmas traditions] in order to be part of it,” he says.

When he founded his company five years ago, he aimed to make the holiday celebration more inclusive and invited his 15 staff, who represented nine different cultures, to add their own individual flavour to the event by bringing a traditional holiday dish to the company potluck. The mix of Trinidadian *pasteles*, Mexican *bacalao*, Indian butter chicken, Vietnamese Pho and Portuguese custard tarts was delicious, but even more important was the sharing of each other’s cultures. “It sparks a whole lot of conversation,” says Noori. 🍁

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