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Devoted workers

Bringing God into the office

By CHRIS ERIKSON

REVENUE was down, and the writing was on the wall: Some people had to be let go. As a senior executive at a private bank, David Miller was charged with chopping his division by 10 percent, which meant bringing the ax down on 50 people.

Give me the names and I'll take care of the rest, the head of human resources told him. It was tempting, but Miller couldn't bring himself to side-step the bloodletting. It didn't square with the principles that guided his business life — the ones set forth in the Bible.

"Somehow my faith told me I needed to look these people in the eye and tell them that this wasn't an issue of their worth as people, that it was just the hard reality that the business was going through a

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DAIRY KING CHEESE EXPERT ADRIAN MURCIER HAS A DREAM JOB

Caifin Thorne; NYP photo composite

BATTLE LINES

As religious expression at work rises, so do lawsuits

While it's open to debate whether bringing religion to work is a good or bad thing, one consequence of it is inarguable: a rise in religious-discrimination and harassment suits.

Most litigation related to work and worship used to revolve around employees seeking accommodations for religious obligations like prayer and holiday observance. But the rise of work-based faith groups has led to a new breed of lawsuits, notes Michael Starr, an employment law partner in the New York office of Hogan and Hartson.

Employers are not obligated to allow workers to form such groups; the law only dictates that they can't approve some and refuse others. While most choose to allow them, some haven't: General Motors became a target of both evangelists' wrath and an unsuccessful 2005 lawsuit when it refused to permit an employee Christian group.

Among the other issues raised when God comes to work is where to draw the line between employees' right to express themselves (by, say, quoting Scripture) and their right to be free from harassment (by, say, not being subjected to co-workers quoting Scripture).

Drew Crandall of Northeast Christians at Work believes people of faith are "unnecessarily intimidated," and makes a point of telling them they "have a lot more freedom than they think they do" to do things like put a poster of Jesus in their cubicle.

When the courts have ruled on such issues, the lines have been drawn differently in different cases. In one, a judge rejected a harassment claim by an employee bothered by a recently converted co-worker who posted religious sayings in her cubicle and expounded at length on her new faith.

An employer "has no legal obligation to suppress any and all religious expression merely because it annoys a single employee," he ruled.

But more often, says Starr, employers have been able to shut down "people who are actively proselytizing or expressing their religious viewpoint in a way others find disturbing."

"The touchstone," he says, "is whether the behavior is disruptive."

Other issues arise over "expressions of moral or political views that are religiously based," says Starr. The most common point of conflict stems from Christians who disavow homosexuality, as in one case where a man successfully sued when he was fired after refusing to sign his company's "diversity policy," saying it didn't square with his beliefs.

Another potential point of conflict surfaces when the believer is a superior, and a worker feels pressure, subtle or not, to get with the program, notes Peter Panken, of Epstein Becker and Green.

"If you feel you have to go to the supervisor's religion in order to advance, that can become religious discrimination," he says, adding that as far as drawing the line, the issue can be likened to sexual harassment — when does asking someone out for a drink constitute inappropriate behavior?

"Supervisors have to be trained carefully," says Panken, who advises companies on faith-related issues. "Religion is a cause of anxiety for a lot of people."

— Chris Erikson



Julian

[COVER STORY]

CREED IN THE

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a tough time," he says.

At that time — the early 1990s — God wasn't often discussed in corporate offices. But things have changed, and nobody knows that better than Miller, who later left the business world for divinity school and a life in academia. Today, as executive director of Yale University Center for Faith and Culture, he's the country's top authority on how faith — which for many years was checked at the door on the way into the office — has boomed in the workplace.

"The environment has changed," says Miller, whose book, "God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement," published last year by Oxford University Press, charts the shift in attitudes toward what he calls the workplace's "final taboo."

Seven years after Fortune magazine did a much-discussed cover story on how executives were bridging the gap between faith and work, that shift has only accelerated, leading to a rise in things like faith-based employee networks, lunchtime prayer meetings, Bible groups and e-mail lists that send scripture over company servers.

"This stuff is going on all over the place," says Miller. "Even in places like New York, it's extraordinary the amount of below-the-parapet activity that's going on inside companies, on company premises," he says. "Just like people might gather to join a softball league, they'll gather to join a faith-at-work group."

While the trend runs across denominations — as the Post recently reported, the Jewish group Aish New York has built a booming business by bringing Torah study to busy executives — Christians have been the most active in terms of bridging belief and business. And those who figure this must be limited to the Bible Belt and other less cosmopolitan climes would do well to heed Miller's "even in New York" comment.

Not only has there's been a rise in the number of Christian "work affinity" groups at city firms — including American Express, Citigroup, Lehman Brothers, JP Morgan Chase, Suisse Bank, Goldman

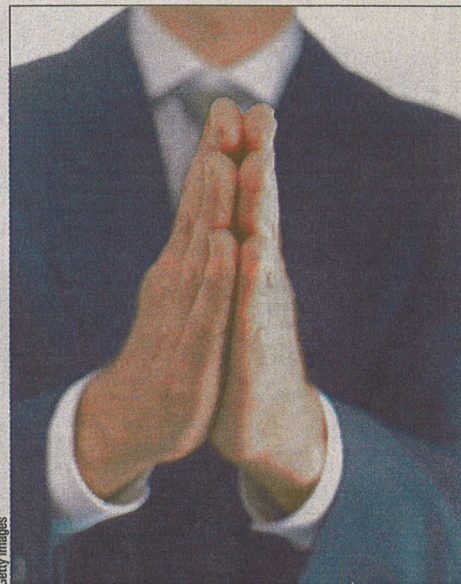
Sachs and Ernst & Young — there's also a growing number of city-based advocacy groups promoting the integration of faith and work.

Among the latter are the Church of the Redeemer's Center for Faith and Work, led by a former Silicon Valley executive, and Business Outreach Lord Directed (BOLD), which is affiliated with St. Bartholomew's on Park Avenue. A former finance executive runs Priority Associates, a Midtown branch of a Dallas-based group that's attracting a growing number of professionals with their message of bringing faith to bear in the workplace (or "marketplace," to use the lingo).

The upshot, say Miller and others, is that New York City's workplaces are home to much more faith-based activity that many people realize. The media and "cultural coastal elite," Miller says, "sometimes miss what's going on under their very noses if it's not something they personally are interested in," he says. "It's really happening, they're just not plugged into the network."

The co-leader of a Christian group at a major finance firm agrees, rattling off a handful of firms with similar group.

"There are very strong religious groups in New York City, it's just that people don't talk about it," said the woman, 25, who asked



Cathy Images

radar seems to have been reflected in the reporting for this story: Most leaders of work-site groups contacted either didn't respond to messages or declined to comment.)

THE WRONG LADDER

As for why faith is making inroads at work, people point to a number of factors. One is that with work eating up a bigger part of people's lives, there's been a general trend to bring more of your "whole self" with you.

"I don't just go to church on the weekend and leave," says Elaine Kung of New Jersey, an AT&T employee who joins some 10 to 20 co-workers for weekly Bible-study groups, held in a conference room at lunchtime.

"God is a 24 by 7 God, not just once in a weekend," says Kung, the organizer of an annual conference named

Called to Work, which will draw speakers to a church in Somerset, NJ, on March 29, to discuss "how we can experience Christ at work." (Previous speakers have included executives from Johnson & Johnson, Lucent and Bear Stearns.)

Drew Crandall, the head of a Connecticut marketing

firm and president of Northeast Christians at Work, notes that the diversity movement that led to workplace groups based on shared ethnicity or sexual orientation opened the door for faith-based groups. He also cites corporate accounting scandals like Enron, deeming them a "wake-up call," that showed the "consequences of having an ethical free-for-all."

"People are coming to realize that the disconnect between faith and work can have brutal consequence."

But perhaps the biggest issue, says Miller, is people's desire to "find some meaning and purpose in their work." He notes that spiritual crises are sometimes prompted by failure, but at least as often by success.

"You see people who have gotten to the top of the ladder, and all of a sudden they feel this emptiness," he says. "Like, hey, I got to the top, but maybe I leaned my ladder against the wrong tree."

This was exactly the case for Dave Smith, a grad of Trinity College and Harvard Business School who spent 11 years at American Express. He describes his youthful self as a typical gung-ho Wall Street type, anxious to pile up money and titles, and not particularly concerned with how he achieved it. He succeeded — and that's when his troubles really began.

"I had exceeded all my goals, yet I was constantly haunted by this question: Is this all there is?" says



GOOD BOOK: David Miller of Yale has charted the rise of faith at work.



not to have her name or the firm name used, citing company protocol about speaking to the press — and noting that firms do not endorse or sponsor such groups. "It's all here, it's just not as public."

(A desire to stay under the

CUBICLE

The 'faith at work movement' builds steam in New York

Smith, now 48. "There was this huge gap inside me that wasn't fixed no matter how big the title or how many people reported to me."

He hit a turning point when he agreed to accompany a co-worker to a Christian discussion group for financiers, despite the fact that the concept held about as much appeal as a plunging stock index.

"What I found," he says, "was a bunch of professionals just like myself, who were talking about the real things going on in our lives, at work in particular, and looking at business principles from a spiritual standpoint."

Today Smith is the local managing director for Priority Associates, whose programs aim to connect not only with people in business, but with workers in the fashion industry (through a group called Paradox) and with artists and entertainers (through one called The Haven). They hold events including get-togethers, Bible-study meetings and lectures — recent offerings include a series called "Character in the Workplace" that featured senior hedge-fund and investment-banking executives.

Smith also works as a consultant, conducting leadership training that's founded in biblical principles, which, he says, "happen to be good business principles." The training contains no "overt dialog" about God, he says, noting that "I might have a scripture involved, but it might be next to a Jack Welch book."

His goal, he says, is to offer a safe environment for professionals to talk about spiritual issues, and "to change us from focusing on what we do or what our title is to focusing on who we are."

DRAWING THE LINES

Another way of summing up one of his group's chief goals is to bring people to Christ, and when it comes to religion and the workplace, therein can lie the rub. Drew Crandall says his group's goal is to "make, motivate and mature Christians in the workplace," and to the extent that "making" them can involve proselytizing, it can raise issues, including legal ones (see sidebar, opposite).

"There are people who take it too far, and while I appreciate their zeal, they do become overbearing," he says. "It boils down to wisdom on when and how to share the good news."

Miller says he regularly has to debunk notions that the faith-at-work movement is "about Bible-pounding Southern Baptists" trying to convert co-workers.

"There's some of those out there, to be sure," he says, "but for most, it's not about that."

While potential legal issues can make companies nervous when God enters the workplace, Miller says many come to see faith groups as a positive influence.

"Once they see it's not about a bunch of rabid proselytizers, they realize there are real benefits if you can harness the energy of this."

To Elaine Kung, the weekly meetings she attends offer an atmosphere of support that makes her and her co-workers "more effective managers and leaders."

The co-founders of the finance-firm group, who spoke together on a conference call, were quick to

say they've never tried to "recruit" anyone for their group, which started as a gathering of friends, and expanded to more than 50 people as word spread.

Today the group — which has informal social gatherings as well as prayer meetings, and shares daily e-mails bearing Scripture — offers a "caring" environment they can turn to for guidance as they try to navigate the workplace according to their spiritual principles.

"If your spirituality is important to you it should influence every decision you make," one says.

In the group, "we have this

opportunity to talk about work issues in light of this part of our culture. It really puts things in perspective." And when one is subject to the pressures of the trading floor, that can have particular value, noted the other.

"When you see the stock exchange on TV, you see people fighting and yelling at each other, and that's the nature of that environment. But at the same time, you can do your job well without being malicious or dishonest," she says. "We can talk to each other when these kinds of issues come up, as they do every day."

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TIP SHEET: "Marketplace minister" Drew Crandall drafted workplace guidelines based on the Ten Commandments.

CAREER COACH Q&A

[GO TO GREG]



Q We recently had a new employee quit on his first day, right after the morning new-hire orientation session. He just said he was quitting and walked out the door. Now we've received a letter from an attorney saying we have to pay him for the day. We never even entered him into the system. Is it possible we still have to pay him?

A My question is, what kind of new-hire orientation do you conduct — first day boot camp in the Marines? I've had new employees not return after their first day — I even had one not return after lunch — but at least they made it through the orientation!

To answer your question, yes, you do owe this serious commitment-phobe for the time he spent in orientation, assuming it was held during normal working hours, was mandatory and related to his work in some way (of course it was). You should acquaint yourself with the Fair Labor Standards Act, which is easy to find online. The other interesting aspect to this is that to pay him, you have to get him into the payroll system — so if you didn't have a chance to collect his Social Security number, etc., you will have to do so, and enter him as a new hire to generate a proper paycheck. I'm not sure it's a good idea to invite him back in though — you may want to work through his attorney. Just a thought.

Q I have more than a decade of experience managing people, but I'm beginning to struggle with managing a multigenerational staff. I've got direct reports both much younger and much older than I am. Any tips?

A I've found that if you hire the right people into the right jobs; treat them with respect; make sure they understand completely what their role is, what's expected of them and how they matter within the organization; give them timely and relevant feedback; recognize and reward them for work well done; provide them with constructive feedback on areas where they need to improve; give them enough autonomy to do their job and hold them accountable for getting it done; and make work an enjoyable place to come to every day, then you'll hit the sweet spot and achieve the common denominator that most employees desire regardless of age. That ought to minimize greatly the "staff management problems" you'll encounter.

Got a question for Greg, or just want to give him props? E-mail gotogreg@nypost.com

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