



View from 'the hill' in Griffith

One of things I love doing when I return to my hometown of Griffith, NSW is go for a walk 'up the hill'. It has good elevation and provides beautiful views of the surrounding farmlands, including a nearby lake. Sometimes in Spring the ground is covered with beautiful, yellow wildflowers. But there are also dangers and things to be wary of while walking on 'the hill'. Snakes in summer, and small volcanic rocks jutting out of the red soil which act as trip hazards.

This article will attempt to provide some wisdom and advice in navigating the rugged but beautiful landscape of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I). It is especially written for leaders of In house Christian workplace groups.

Some Christians working for large organisations feel nervous about working under Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) policies. However, it is worthwhile remembering that there are many good things about D&I policies, including the fact that most corporations include 'religion' as one of the personal identity markers which you are allowed to bring to work as part of your 'whole' self.

The caveat being that religious beliefs are not to cause disharmony, or harm other employees.

THE TERRAIN - WHAT IS D&I AND WHY DO COMPANIES HAVE IT?

Most large organisations have policies on Diversity and Inclusion (D&I)*1. These policies affect hiring decisions and also drive the efforts of the organisation to support social justice causes such as the equality and affirmation of women, Indigenous people, LGBTQI+ people and those with a disability, to name a few of the most commonly championed causes.

There is also the recognition that D&I helps to build a strong organisation.

Diversity contributes to a wide-ranging employee skills base and also helps the organisation better understand and relate to the many and complex segments of its customer base.

Inclusion encourages employees to work harmoniously together, with mutual respect, providing equal opportunities for all. It also contributes to a more enjoyable work environment where employees are given permission to relax and be themselves (creating a "safe space" for people).

Notice how the introduction in the Suncorp D&I policy below reflects these goals of social justice and building organisational strength.

*The Diversity & Inclusion Policy outlines Suncorp's commitment to promoting Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace, and to fostering equitable opportunities and fair treatment for all of our Non-Executive Directors and Employees (our People). Suncorp recognises the value that a diverse workplace and that we will be our best when our workforce is as diverse, talented and passionate as the communities in which we live and operate.*²*

A BEAUTIFUL TRACK, BUT CHALLENGING

From a Christian (Biblical) point of view, we can agree with much of the spirit and intent of D&I policies. The Suncorp D&I policy for example states that the aim of it's D&I policies is "to treat others fairly and with respect, irrespective of their differences; to ensure equity and fairness in people management practices and processes so that decisions and initiatives are free from discrimination, harassment, bullying, victimisation and vilification;" ^{*2}

The main area of conflict with D&I policies comes when Christian employees feel they are being forced to affirm and participate in causes which contradict their faith. For example, *Wear it Purple Day*^{*3}, which makes some people feel pressured to endorse a cause they do not support. Conflict can also come from Christians voicing their beliefs at work with a lack of humility, wisdom and respect.

The purpose of this article is not to provide counsel on how to navigate the D&I sponsored causes that make Christians feel uncomfortable, but rather to focus on how your In house Christian group can use D&I in a positive way for the benefit of your group and ultimately for the good of the company.

TIPS FOR WALKING THE D&I TRACK

1. Be satisfied to climb a hill and not a mountain

You don't have to become a fully fledged, company championed, D&I recognised group in order to enjoy some of the benefits of D&I policies. For example, you might just want to ask to set up a group on the company communications channel (Yammer, Teams, fb Workplace).

Here is an example of a respectful email to HR in one of the big banks asking to set up an online prayer group using the bank's internal comms system

Firstly, thank you for championing inclusion and diversity across [company name]. I believe that [company name] represents the best of Australian society as a diverse corporate entity which allows its people to bring their full selves to work. We are all aware that diverse organisations experience greater levels of success where their diversity is a strength.

There are many [company name] employees who are active in the Christian faith. In the past we would have small prayer groups where we would come together, meet in fellowship and pray for each other, our leaders, our customers and [company name].

I'd like to create a group on perhaps Yammer / Teams to facilitate this virtually, I thought to check in first before proceeding. Are there any protocols I need to be aware of?

NB. He received a positive and warm response from HR to proceed

I have also heard of examples of (unofficial) Christian groups submitting articles for the company newsletter around Easter or Christmas, with a personal story of how their families celebrate these religious festivals, a positive message of hope and mentioning the group details at the end of the article.

A few years ago the In house Christian group at the Commonwealth Bank in Sydney applied for, and received, official recognition as a group under the Mosaic Cultural Diversity network. They were allowed to book rooms, use the company communication channels and were given a budget to pay for catering, speaker's fees etc. for special events. Probably the biggest advantage was to hold their events under the Mosaic Cultural Diversity banner, making it easier to invite guests along.

2. Climb the mountain.

Climbing a mountain requires a lot of planning, time and effort. That said, the view from the top and the sense of achievement can make it all worthwhile.

You may desire that 'Faith' becomes one of the officially recognised and promoted D&I causes in your company. While not impossible, my sense is that this is difficult in Australia. For example to become an officially recognised Employee Action Group^{*4} at Westpac you need executive sponsorship. In the USA there are more examples of Faith being one of the major D&I pillars. See [Faithforce](#) for example in the US based company Salesforce.

Another thing to keep in mind is that if you wanted to apply to become one of the company's major diversity networks, it would probably have to be under the banner of *all* faiths or a broader cultural group. Companies are wary of supporting one particular faith over another. You would likely be asked to present a submission for all the faith groups (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish). Working harmoniously

with these other faith groups, and for the Christian message to be heard and appreciated above the clamour of competing religious voices, will be challenging but not impossible.

During the Covid pandemic, when the virus was wreaking havoc in India, the Christian group of a large multinational company based in Australia, was granted permission to organise an Interfaith prayer event for the whole office to pray for India and work colleagues there.

This event was given the green light because prayers were said by people from multiple faiths – Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim and Christian. 75 colleagues attended this event and the feedback was very positive. A non Christian manager commented privately to the leader of the Christian group that the Christian prayer stood out as being more personal and touching than the others.

3. How to approach HR (whether seeking to climb a hill or a mountain).

- a. **With humility, respect and much prayer.** Remember that Christians are told to honour and respect those in authority over us (1 Peter 2:17) and that God is Sovereign over the hearts of rulers (Proverbs 19:21). While communicating clearly with HR, we also need to do it with gentleness and respect, leaving the outcome to God.
- b. **Prepare** a pack to present to management. This might include:
 - i. **The case** for your group to become an officially recognised group, including: statistics (for example 80% of the world claims some sort of religious affiliation⁵), existing activities showing there is interest, how your group will help Christians bring their whole self to work, activities are open to everyone, executive sponsors and other companies with similar groups.
 - ii. **The broad purpose** of your group using words that will appeal to management (e.g. using terms from the company's Values). For example: *The Company X Christian network seeks to help Christian believers live out their faith at work with integrity and respect, and to be a blessing to all people at Company X.*
 - iii. **Proposed activities.** For example: Bible discussions, prayer meetings, Christmas and Easter events, social events.
 - iv. **Relationships with other groups.** Are there other employee networks in your company with which you might build mutually beneficial relationships? For example, helping a charity.
 - v. **External partners.** For example citybibleforum.org, explaining how they can assist (study resources, speakers for events, peer support with leaders from other companies etc.).
 - vi. **Resources request** eg. access to communication channels, money for events catering and to pay speakers, room bookings, technical help for events, a mention on the website.
- c. **Support, from an executive** who is positively disposed to, and supportive of your group. He or she might also be able to help you frame your case, point you to the right people to approach and participate in some of your events.

IN CONCLUSION, appealing to D&I policies in order to raise the profile of your Christian group and to promote your events can be a satisfying and worthwhile journey. It will require wisdom, determination and prayer to make the most of D&I policies while not compromising your conscience before God. Fortunately we have the Lord as our travelling companion. He is with us always, wise beyond measure, guiding the way and carrying our burdens.

FOR MORE INFORMATION and resources to help you, contact craig.josling@citybibleforum.org

NOTES

*1 **Definitions** (from the Suncorp D&I policy *2)

Diversity is "The variety of difference between people in our organisation. It includes characteristics such as: age; gender; family responsibilities; relationship status; race; religious belief; cultural identity and background; ethnicity; sexual orientation; gender identity; intersex status; socio-economic background; physical and intellectual ability; caring status; Indigenous background; and English language skills."

Inclusion describes an environment where everyone is able to be themselves and feel valued, involved and respected for their perspectives and contributions

* 2 <https://www.suncorpgroup.com.au/uploads/Diversity-and-Inclusion-Policy-External.pdf>

*3 **Wear it Purple Day** is an annual LGBTIQ+ awareness day.

*4 **Employee Action Groups** (EAGs) are informal employee advocacy groups where employees can 'opt-in' to help build an inclusive culture, and influence for positive change across shared areas of interest. (taken from the Westpac D&I policy).

*5 <https://hbr.org/2020/12/creating-space-for-religious-diversity-at-work>

OTHER ARTICLES ON D&I

<https://www.dca.org.au/research/project/creating-inclusive-multi-faith-workplaces>

<https://www.dca.org.au/blog/religious-inclusion-why-its-important-and-how-get-it>

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/religion-diversity-business-inclusion/>

<https://diversityq.com/faith-is-the-forgotten-di-characteristic-1512592/>

<https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/salesforce-has-a-faithforce>