A Contextual Exploration of Islamophobia and Discriminatory Actions Directed Towards Middle Eastern-American Employees in the U.S. Workplace

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The September 11, 2001, attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City increased tension and anxiety between Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the United States. For many Americans, including Muslim Americans, this was a tipping point that changed their lives and how they live forever (Gladwell, 2002). Fear and anger quickly swept through the United States, which forced many Muslims, Hindus, and members of Arabic and other Middle Eastern ethnic groups living in America to defend themselves against violence and discrimination. Mosques (Muslim places of worship) and other religious temples that resembled a mosque were vandalized or burned to the ground throughout the United States. These actions left Muslims scared but also very angry toward non-Muslims. A systemic fear had spread throughout the nation like an epidemic (Gladwell, 2002). Many Muslims in America felt that people were out to get them, and many non-Muslims felt that all Muslims were terrorists and that Islam preached terrorism and anti-Semitic ideas. In my own community, several members of my Islamic congregation were charged with funding terrorism and were arrested, but only one person out of six was actually found guilty of this charge. Incidents similar to this one were happening all over
the world. An article by Teresa Watanabe in the Los Angeles Times reported a trend of many Islamic charity organizations being forced to shut down all over the United States.

Since 2001, U.S. workplaces have experienced a tremendous increase of discrimination complaints related to race, ethnicity, and religion, especially discriminatory actions directed towards Middle Eastern-American employees. Islamophobia and religious conflict has been studied extensively on a global scale but there has been limited scholarship on how it manifests itself in the form of complaints in the US workplace. These complaints have evolved from fearful and resentful perceptions of non-Christian employees. Historically at most workplaces in the United States, diversity training and other cultural initiatives have focused diversity training as only a protection from potential lawsuits. Recent U.S. diversity training has evolved from sexual harassment, racial issues involving African-American and Latino/Hispanic American workers to new emerging issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity. What is often missing from the diversity and inclusion training and workplace discussion is importance of the development of religious cultural competence, religious literacy, and religious understanding. When the presidential administration puts forward communications and policies around a Muslim ban there is collateral damage to the perception and treatment of Middle Eastern-American employees that are U.S. citizens. It is critical of US organizations to have an infrastructure and properly trained diversity personnel that can effectively and properly address these issues. This presentation explores all of these issues along with the potential costs to organizations related to
employee turnover, discrimination lawsuits, employee disengagement, employee stress, and employee absenteeism.