

CAN I ASK YOU SOMETHING?

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CULTURAL QUESTIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Practical advice on how to avoid litigation and misunderstanding at work.

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As America's workplaces become increasingly diverse, people of different backgrounds find themselves interacting more frequently. With that frequent interaction, curiosity about cultural differences is inevitable. It would seem that if we know more about each other's cultural norms we might be able to relate to each other more effectively. But too often good intentions go terribly wrong and what was intended to be cultural exploration can lead to huge problems. Employers and employees must recognize that there can be legal consequences for failing to understand each other in the workplace. Too often, the consequence is litigation in the form of a Title VII lawsuit. While I make no claims to speak for all minorities in the workplace, I will suggest a few tips to minimize the potential for misunderstanding.

- Before asking any cultural questions, make sure that the person you are asking is comfortable with the subject matter.

Excelling in the workplace is about fitting in. Some minorities may not feel comfortable talking about issues of race and ethnicity because it highlights an aspect about them that is different. Further, the person you ask may be uncomfortable speaking for an entire race of people or simply resent being burdened with satisfying your curiosity.

“Men hate each other because they fear each other, and they fear each other because they don’t know each other, and they don’t know each other because they are often separated from each other.” Martin Luther King, Jr.

- Be very cautious when asking cultural questions around subordinates.

Asking these types of questions to subordinates can be dangerous because it could be used against you. If you later make a decision with respect to that employee that he or she perceives to be unfair, you may find that the question is included as evidence of racial insensitivity in an EEOC Charge.

- Be very cautious when asking cultural questions around superiors.

Asking this type of question of the wrong way could stymie your career whether you know it or not. First, your superiors may question your judgment. Second, if for some reason you are unable to ask the question in a culturally sensitive way, you may offend a people who have your future in your hands.

- Think about the question before you ask.

No matter how curious you may be, there are somethings that are better left unasked. Ask yourself if this is something you really need to know for business reasons. If it isn't business related, it may be better to ask a non-work friend.

- Phrase your questions appropriately.

Think about is how you want to convey the questions before you speak. Do not mimic, mock or alter your speech or mannerisms in an effort to identify with the co-worker. If you cannot do this, you should tread lightly.