Hello Alice,

This is my first time writing, so thank you for being available! I have searched the web for any insight but haven't found much. Here it goes...

I have a friend at work who is very religious. He's not outspoken or boisterous about it, but it is generally known. I tend to keep away from talk of religion/politics at the work place — I am an Agnostic. My problem is that this friend sends text message bible quotes around holidays. They are foreboding and very fire-and-brimstone like. I am unsure how to handle these.

In the past I have ignored the messages, but at work I am asked if I received the messages where I usually reply that I had my phone off, or that I had not. To which he will resend on the spot. If I say I have received the message, then he will attempt to chat about it, to which I am resistant. I see this person almost every day, and he is genuinely a nice person, but I cringe around holidays. Doing anything drastic I feel will make things awkward, but more subtle tactics have had no effect. I don't even mind "Bless you's" or "have a blessed new year!" It's the fear and power and almighty thunder that really rattles my nerves. I feel stuck, what other options do I have?

Answer

Dear Reader,

You're in a tough position! Coworkers and colleagues may feel uncomfortable by conflict and avoid it in an effort to maintain a positive relationship, especially when it involves aspects of a person's identity. Just as your colleague deserves respect when it comes to his personal beliefs and boundaries, you also deserve the same considerations. It sounds like you've tried to convey your disinterest in talking about religion but your peer isn’t picking up what you're putting down.

It may be time to sit down with your coworker to have a more overt conversation about his behavior. You may want to start by explaining to him that while you understand his commitment to his faith, his texts make you uncomfortable. You could ask that as a sign of respect to you, he refrain from sending these texts and talking to you about his religious beliefs. These conversations can be tricky because religion can be a critical part of people's lives from which
they may derive their values, morals, and reasons for living. However, you have a right to have a workplace free of proselytization where others are trying to convert you to their faith.

When confronting your colleague, it may be helpful to know the laws surrounding this issue. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act [2] prohibits employees from being harassed about their religion. Harassment is defined as either hostility or proselytizing; it sounds like he is doing the latter and may even be doing the former, especially if he is ignoring your resistance to the conversations. What you’re experiencing could be considered as a form of harassment, which is illegal. People have taken legal action for such offenses and while going that route is a personal choice that you may or may not want to make, rest assured that this behavior from your coworker is inappropriate.

It may be a good idea to begin documenting these incidents: the texts, his questions to you about his messages, and any other interactions that occur regarding his religious beliefs that make you feel uncomfortable. For example, you could keep a log where you record the details of the direct conversation, and then continue to document in that log any other religious proselytizing or changes in his behavior towards you after said conversation. Do you feel comfortable talking to a supervisor about his behavior? Particularly if he doesn’t respect your wishes after you have talked to him, it may be key to notify a supervisor. You may also want to have a confidential conversation with a representative from human resources (HR) as these professionals are trained to assist with situations like you have described. The HR representative can guide you on how to document or track the situation and also provide support on how to have a balanced conversation with your coworker.

Reader, you deserve to have your boundaries respected and to work in a respectful work environment. Hopefully with some direct and clear communication, this situation can be resolved. You may want to consider checking out other possible strategies [3] and related Q&As from the Relationships [4] category of the Go Ask Alice! archives for additional tactics on how to approach the conversation.

Good luck!

Alice!

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