

Inclusive Holidays: Building Trust and Engagement at Work

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By Sarah Goodman



With Lunar New Year falling on February 17 this year, employers have an opportunity to pause and think more broadly about how religious and cultural holidays are recognized in the workplace. Holiday inclusion is often treated as a year-end issue, but for many employees, meaningful observances occur well outside the traditional Western calendar.

Lunar New Year is widely celebrated across East and Southeast Asian cultures and, for many individuals, carries deep cultural, familial, and sometimes religious significance. Employees may travel, participate in religious ceremonies, or spend extended time with family. When these observances are overlooked or misunderstood, employees can feel invisible or undervalued, even in otherwise well-intentioned workplaces.

From an employment law perspective, holiday inclusion is not simply a morale issue. Federal and state anti-discrimination laws require employers to reasonably accommodate sincerely held religious beliefs unless doing so would create an undue hardship. While Lunar New Year itself is often cultural rather than religious, requests for time off or schedule flexibility may still implicate accommodation obligations, particularly when tied to religious practice or long-standing traditions.

Problems most often arise when holiday-related requests are handled inconsistently. Approving time off for some holidays but questioning others, or celebrating certain traditions while ignoring others, can expose employers to claims of disparate treatment. These risks are heightened when managers are left to make ad hoc decisions without clear guidance.

Employers can reduce both legal exposure and employee frustration by focusing on flexibility and neutrality. Policies that allow employees to use floating holidays or personal time for observances that matter to them tend to work better than rigid holiday calendars. Clear communication and manager training are also critical so that requests tied to cultural or religious observance are handled thoughtfully and consistently.

Workplace celebrations require similar care. Recognizing Lunar New Year can be positive, but only when done respectfully and without assumptions about who celebrates or how. Employees should never feel pressured to participate, explain their culture, or serve as informal ambassadors simply because of their background.

As workforces continue to diversify, inclusive holiday practices increasingly function as both a compliance strategy and a culture building tool. Employees notice when their traditions are acknowledged and when they are ignored. Over time, those signals can affect engagement, retention, and trust.

Lunar New Year serves as a useful reminder that inclusion does not require employers to recognize every holiday on the calendar. Instead, it requires systems that allow employees to observe what matters to them without friction or stigma. Thoughtful planning now can help employers support a diverse workforce while staying aligned with legal obligations

throughout the year.