How to prevent religious discrimination at work

As a manager, you need to let employees express their religious beliefs while, at the same time, making sure those expressions don't infringe on the rights of co-workers or the organization.

That task is more difficult than ever. Why? Employee claims of religious discrimination in the workplace have nearly doubled in the past decade.

The law: Federal religious-discrimination law (in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act) prohibits employers with 15 or more employees from discriminating against applicants or employees based on their religion. Here's what that means in a practical, day-by-day sense:

- Hiring and firing. You can't treat applicants or employees less (or more) favorably in hiring, firing or other conditions of employment because of their religious beliefs or practices.
- Proselytizing. You can't force employees to participate (or not participate) in a religious activity at work.
- Accommodation. You must reasonably accommodate an employee's "sincerely held" religious beliefs and practices.
- Undue hardship. You can deny a religious accommodation request if it would create an "undue hardship" on the organization's business interests. The EEOC defines "undue hardship" as something that: "requires more than ordinary administrative costs, diminishes efficiency in other jobs, infringes on other employees' job rights or benefits, impairs workplace safety, causes co-workers to carry the accommodated employee's share of potentially hazardous or burdensome work, or if the proposed accommodation conflicts with another law or regulation."
- Religious expression. You must permit employees' religious expression if they're allowed to engage in other personal expression at work, so long as the expression doesn't impose an undue hardship on the company or infringe on the rights of co-workers or customers.
- Religious harassment. You must take steps to prevent religious harassment of employees.