

One season, many traditions

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By: Arin N. Reeves, J.D., Ph.D.

Nextions

Understanding how others mark holidays can tell us much

Is history the same thing as tradition? Is tradition always derived from history? These questions, while somewhat philosophical in nature, raise important questions about how we gather, connect and celebrate holidays in today's workplaces.

As we move into the holiday season and prepare ourselves for the barrage of commentaries, critiques and counsel on how the holiday season should be recognized and/or celebrated in workplaces (especially ones that are focused on being inclusive), reflecting on the question of how history and tradition are different is an exercise that leads to greater understanding of differences, no matter what answers you select.

Let's take Thanksgiving Day as an example. How much of the Thanksgiving celebration is a derivative of history and how much is a choice of tradition?

In our home, dinner on Thanksgiving Day has evolved into a long-standing tradition of community and gratitude. Everyone in my family and extended circle of friends knows that there is always an open invitation to attend Thanksgiving dinner at our home. You don't even need to let us know that you are coming in advance, but you do need to come prepared to talk about at least one thing for which you are profoundly grateful. In our traditional celebration of community on Thanksgiving, we honor the practice of gratitude, and the traditions around gratitude are deeply engrained in all we do, say and take in on that day.

A Native American friend of mine celebrates Thanksgiving with his family as a day of remembrance, not gratitude. He and his family have an open invitation to dinner at their home just as we do at ours, but their guests come prepared to recite the names of their ancestors who need to be remembered, because their history has never been recognized as a part of our collective history. While my family gathers to express gratitude, his family gathers to give recognition to voices that were not heard or recorded very well in our history.

Both of these traditions are important traditions for our respective families, but they are derived from very different relationships with and interpretations of American history. There are numerous historical accounts (many in conflict with each other) of how the concept of Thanksgiving evolved and what led President Abraham Lincoln to proclaim the last Thursday of November to be a national day of "thanksgiving and praise." My family's tradition honors the focus on Thanksgiving, and my friend's family honors the voices that historians did not take into consideration when writing our history.



So, what can a workplace do when traditions around Thanksgiving or other holidays feel alienating to people whose perspectives may not be included in what we consider to be our history? The only thing an inclusive workplace can do — and still be inclusive — is to honor both the history and the traditions and help people understand the relationship between the two while simultaneously recognizing how the two may diverge.

While history is the study of what we know, or theorize, has actually happened in the past, traditions are the creation and transmission of cultural values and expressions around these events from the past.

History gives us a timeline with data points of who, what, when and where. Traditions give us values, principles and practices to which we can adhere and inspire. Sometimes, the two are connected; often, they are not. When we mistake one for the other or talk about the two as if they are interchangeable, we miss the point of both and we benefit from neither.

Every year around this time, my children come home from school with colored pictures of turkeys, pilgrims, idyllic mealtime representations of Native Americans and early pioneers breaking bread together in friendship. They come home with narratives of a meal that was shared by strangers who worked together to overcome common challenges.

And every year around this time, I sit them down and talk to them candidly about how the history of Thanksgiving cannot be confused with the traditions of Thanksgiving. We talk about the history (the varying versions) in detail and then we discuss our traditions. My friend goes through the same exercise with his children and grandchildren. There is some convergence in the history we both discuss with our families, but the traditions diverge greatly, and neither of our traditions diminish the value of the other's traditions.

And Thanksgiving is only the beginning. We have Christmas, Hanukkah, Ramadan, Eid al-Adha, Rohatsu, Yule, Boxing Day and so many more. Across all cultures, November and December are very popular months for important holidays. All of these holidays have traditions that vary from family to family, and they all are derived from histories through which the traditions are born.

It is a great time of the year to celebrate the diversity of traditions while learning more about our collective history. And it's a time to remind ourselves that learning more about our history — a history that accounts for all of us — does not diminish the power of traditions. And respecting the differences in traditions does not dishonor history.