



Laboring Results

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SOLVING AN EMPLOYER'S DILEMMA: CELEBRATING THE MLK HOLIDAY WITHOUT CUTTING INTO THEIR REVENUE

Employers face a dilemma, each year, on which holidays to give off to their employees. Many employers do not give Martin Luther King Jr. birthday as a holiday. They do not want to be seen as racist or close minded, but employers are concerned about making enough revenue in order to pay for their overhead. For many employers its occurrence just two weeks after the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, when many businesses are closed for part of or sometimes all of the week, is troublesome. However, employers have a lot of options in solving this dilemma without cutting into their revenue. Recognizing the role that Martin Luther King, Jr. played in promoting peace, social justice and racial and class equality is the primary purpose of the holiday which can be celebrated by the employees in ways other than giving a paid holiday.

On January 17, 2000, for the first time, Martin Luther King Day was officially observed in all 50 U.S. states. On November 2, 1983, President Reagan signed a bill creating a federal holiday to honor King. Opposition to the bill was led by Senator Jesse Helms, who questioned whether King was important enough to receive such an honor. He was also critical of King's opposition to the Vietnam War and accused King of having Communist connections. On January 16, 2006 Greenville County, South Carolina was the last county in the U.S. to officially adopt Martin Luther King Day as a paid holiday. Many individuals do not celebrate the birthday of Dr. King, because as Jesse Helms opined, he was not important enough in United States History.

However, Americans lose sight of the importance of the Holiday and fail to cherish their civil rights. The celebration of Martin Luther King's birthday must be substantive as well as symbolic. It must be more than a

day of celebration. The holiday should be a day of reflection, a day of teaching non-violent philosophy and strategy, a day of getting involved in non-violent action for social and economic progress and racial and ethnic equality. It is a day that is marked by demonstrations for peace, social justice and racial and class equality, as well as a national day of volunteer community service. In Utah, Martin Luther King Day is also known as Human Rights Day; similarly, in Arizona and New Hampshire, Martin Luther King Day is also known as Civil Rights Day.

Overall, in 2006, 31% of employers were giving employees the day off, with 35% of large employers over 1,000 giving time off and 29% of smaller employers giving time off. The observance is most popular amongst nonprofit organizations and least popular among factories and manufacturers, because most factories have been shut down for one week at the end of the year. Additionally, some schools and places of higher education are closed for classes; others remain open but may hold seminars or celebrations of Dr. King's message.

How can employers celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday to give it meaning to their employees, other than another paid holiday?

1. Provide a lunch for your employees and have a seminar regarding elimination of bias and highlight Dr. King's teachings. Read his speech "I have a Dream" he delivered during the March on Washington.
2. A Floating Civil Rights Holiday. Celebrate the diversity of your workforce by granting a day off for a Civil Rights leader that an individual employee's race or ethnic group honours. There are ten annual Federal holidays in the United States: New Years Day, Martin Luther King's Birthday, President's Day, Memorial Day, July 4th, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Of these, Martin Luther King's Birthday and Columbus Day celebrate not only the accomplishment of the individual but recognize that person's race. There are large celebrations in the African-American and Italian communities on each of these respective holidays. In some locales, holidays are granted to recognize local leaders, such as Caesar Chavez day for the Latino community.
3. Community Service Activity. Have your employees participate in a community service activity. This could be from helping out at a Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration, to collecting food or other items to help a particular community service project. Employees could be given time during their work day on Martin Luther King's Holiday to engage in the activity.

4. Sponsor an event. . Let your employees know that you recognize the accomplishments of Dr. King and you will observe the day by supporting a local event.
5. Allow employees a few hours off to attend morning events on Martin Luther King's Birthday holiday.
6. Have a moment of silence and distribute Dr. King's speech I have a dream.
7. Speak up for an injustice in your community.
8. Pass on the legacy. Have your employees give a talk to children about him. It only takes a moment to recognize his contributions.

For an employer to be socially conscious does not have to be costly
It requires an employer to open its mind and be inclusive for all.

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