

Case Study – Tangle over a bangle

Note: the details have been adapted and elaborated from the actual case to make it appropriate for teaching purposes.

Each culture and generation has its own norms of behaviour and dress that define its culture and separate particular 'in' groups from other 'out' groups not part of that culture. Organizations have legal frameworks within which they must operate or face prosecution and possible penalty. There are three main areas of legislation relevant to this particular case study. Firstly anti-discrimination legislation which attempts to lay down the ground rules for seeking to prevent discrimination against various groups, for example women and people of either gender from ethnic minority groups. The second area of legislation is that concerning Health and Safety at Work which attempts to provide for (amongst other things) a safe working environment for employees. The third is the environmental health requirements covering food preparation and attempting to prevent food poisoning and other health hazards being passed on to customers through the food chain. On occasions these three areas can appear to collide and provide managers with difficult problems. The wearing of jewellery whilst working with machines and food products is one such area of potential conflict.

In the Sikh religion a metal bangle known as a kara is worn by all believers as protection against evil and temptation. To a serious believer in the Sikh religion this is obviously very important and such bangles cannot be removed easily, having to be cut off if necessary. They are obviously worn constantly, whatever the individual is doing. They are clearly not in the same category of jewellery as wedding and other rings, bracelets, friendship bands and watches that might be worn by any Christian or non-Sikh person.

A new manager (let us call him Mr Wood) was appointed to work in a food preparation factory which was located in an area in which both Christian and Sikh people lived. For the sake of realism let us call this city Leicester in England. This new manager decided that the kara worn by Sikh employees represented a health hazard in relation to food preparation. He claimed that it could harbour bacteria etc, which could be transferred to the food being prepared. Therefore he required Sikh employees to remove all such bangles to prevent the possibility of germs etc, being passed into the food products during processing.

One lady, Inderjit Kaur, refused to have the kara removed and was interviewed by Mr Wood during which she was warned of the possible consequences if she continued to refuse. She continued to wear the kara and so failed to comply with the new rule and as a consequence, after another interview with Mr Wood, was moved to another area of the factory. The area to which she was moved involved boxing up the packaged food and was very cold as there were deep freezers nearby. Also she was the only employee working there continually. The other employees working in that area were only there for a couple of hours at a time and then went back to work in their "home" departments which were not as cold or unpleasant to work in.

Inderjit became so distressed at her treatment that she became ill and went on sick leave after one week working in the cold conditions of the new department. Mr Wood would not change his mind even after being contacted by representatives of the employee's trade union (the Bakers', Food and Allied Workers Union) and the British Sikh Foundation. He continued to claim that the kara presented a health risk and should be removed. It is interesting to note that at no time did he attempt to suggest that wearing a metal bangle could be a safety hazard when working with machines as it could become caught in the equipment so trapping the arm of the worker and potentially causing severe damage to the employee. Equally Mr Wood did not require non Sikh employees to remove bangles, wedding rings or other jewellery.

Having failed to change Mr Wood's mind Inderjit resigned from the company rather than put up with working in very cold conditions. She presented a case to an Industrial Tribunal claiming that she was being discriminated against by being required to remove her kara when it was a requirement of her religion. In addition other employees were not required to remove rings etc. The point was made that rings were much more likely to come off during work activities and fall into the food products than a kara which would have

to be cut off. Equally most rings have an elaborate design and provide many more opportunities for germs to breed than a plain metal bangle. Inderjit claimed that she had worn the kara for seven years before Mr Wood was appointed to the company and that it had never been suggested by management that a problem existed before his appointment. Inderjit also claimed that the wearing of the kara was much more important to her than any job and that was why she was forced to leave, a fact known by Mr Wood. Therefore she claimed she was being forced out of the company because of the fact that she was a Sikh, not because of food safety rules.

Tasks

1. In groups of four split into two groups of two. One team of two should prepare to defend management's position in this case and the other team defend Inderjit Kaur. Having prepared your arguments, debate the merits of the respective cases before another group of four students (the Industrial Tribunal) and then allow them to decide who should "win" and why. Your group of four would then act as the Industrial Tribunal for this group of students
2. In groups of four discuss and determine what material from the OB text is relevant to this situation and what does the case tell you about management and OB in general?
3. Imagine that two members of your group of four students are the manager Mr Wood, the other two being representatives of the trade union and British Sikh Foundation. Mr Wood now realises, having spoken to these representatives that he is about to be faced with an expensive legal case which he will probably lose. Mr Wood decides that it might be better to try and negotiate a solution to the situation. Within the group prepare a negotiation brief for the respective roles and then call a meeting in which you seek to resolve the situation to the satisfaction of all parties. After a solution is reached, discuss why Mr Wood did not approach the issue from this perspective when the issues first emerged.

Based on *Tangle over a Bangle*, *Daily Mail*, 8 August 1998, p 35.