

Does Smudging Belong in the Workplace?

By Toby Sawyer

Abstract: This mini case study examines the controversy over smudging rituals in a workplace following a threatening incident involving a Native American client. The ritual, performed by an employee to cleanse the office of negativity, sparked health concerns and cultural debates among staff and clients. The supervisor, Anna, faced the challenge of balancing cultural practices with health and safety, considering legal frameworks and strong opinions. This case offers the opportunity to consider equitable solutions that respect cultural identity while also ensuring workplace safety.

Recently, a highly confrontational event occurred at work. A Native American client entered an urban tribal office – an organization that serves tribal clients and their families – and threatened to harm his ex-wife, who was on site attending a day-long client orientation meeting. He also threatened staff and other clients. The individual was subsequently arrested and booked into jail. After his departure, the ex-wife, along with several other clients and staff members, engaged in emotionally charged discussions about the incident.

The next morning, an employee who is a member of a Northwest tribe performed a smudging ritual to purify and cleanse the office of the residual negativity left behind by the harmful event. Another employee immediately complained that the smoke from the smudging aggravated her allergies and interfered with her ability to care for the clients assigned to her. Additionally, two clients reported to management that the smoke smelled like marijuana (which is illegal) and hindered their ability to remain clean and sober.

Altogether, the office has nine employees. Three employees strongly believed traditional Native rituals help to maintain Native identity, values, and culture, and they supported the use of smudging in this situation. Three employees opposed the use of smudging in the workplace due to adverse physiological reactions or differing value judgements regarding how it should be performed. The three remaining staff chose to remain silent on the issue, alluding to concerns about job security and loyalty. The supervisor was steadfastly committed to her own traditional practices and native culture, and she often communicated to staff that her highest priority was serving the clients the agency was mandated to support. Ninety percent of the staff are enrolled American Indians with diverse cultural backgrounds and traditions.

The supervisor, Anna, was very sensitive about injecting her own beliefs into this dispute, and tried to carefully evaluate the various strong, persuasive, and competing interpretations of this situation. The objection to the smoke itself was based on scientific research acknowledging the physiological effects from particulate matter, like smudge and cigarettes, as they are linked to upper respiratory conditions (asthma), heart attacks, and strokes (Collins, C. 2010). Most affected are the elderly, infants, and children. Infants are more impacted because their lungs are

still developing, and they are breathing at faster rates and taking in more air contaminants (Collins, C. 2010). Anna was aware that more than a few clients and their children had chronic breathing issues, allergies, and compromised immune systems that could be impacted by smudging. On the other hand, there are indigenous healers around the world who use and advocate the burning and inhalation of smoke from specific plants such as Mullein and Yerba Santa to heal upper respiratory conditions (Renee, 2010).

Anna believed the objections from some clients who inferred that marijuana, rather than smudge, was used in the office could potentially be resolved through education, and the legal and cultural distinctions between smudging and marijuana use. Additionally, she realized the staff conversations suggested different belief systems around smudging might be contributing to the dispute. Some staff members raised questions such as: *Does an employee have the right to perform such a ritual? Who taught them? Did they receive permission to perform the ritual? Have they done it “the right way”? If the office is not on tribal land, is it right to use this ritual? If a non-native were performing the smudging, would the objections be different?*

Anna could only surmise that the three individuals who remained silent during these conversations were uncertain about their roles within the office organizational structure. Two of the employees had recently been hired and were still on probation, which meant termination could be applied more liberally. The third employee was a relative and fellow tribal member of the individual performing the smudging. Anna assumed that loyalty to family and tribe was the primary motivation for his decision not to participate in the discussions around smudging in the workplace.

Anna knew both employees and clients clearly understood the agency existed to assist families in need who have tribal affiliations. She also knew most of the strong opinions surrounding cultural traditions like smudging were based on the valid, diverse traditional spiritual practices – such as Smokehouse, Sundance, Native American Church, and Seven Drums ceremonies – and how the smudging ritual was similar to, or different from, each of these practices (McGaa, 1990).

Most individuals felt that smudging could be performed at work but also believed cultural rituals were more appropriately practiced in non-work environments, such as at home or on tribal lands. A few noted that prayer was regularly observed before they served every meal onsite to the clients and argued that because smudging and prayer are synonymous in some traditions, smudging should also be permitted.

The individual who performed the smudging ceremony argued that cultural identity was the tie that bound employees and clients, and everyone had the right to benefit from any and all rituals that promote cultural connection. Her main point was urban natives may have the greatest need for cultural identity and healing.

Anna also considered the greater context; the agency that oversees operations of this urban Indian office helps needy families through a federal-tribal partnership grant. Services are focused on strengthening families by promoting work as a path to independence. The aim of this federal program is to move families toward self-sufficiency while encouraging and supporting flexibility, innovation, and creativity in local tribal programs. Another complementary program,

also under the umbrella of the agency, frequently sponsors events that combine educational, spiritual, and cultural activities, both traditional and nontraditional, to encourage individuals' understanding of self and what it means to be healthy (O'Brien, 2008, Chapter7). At these events, the smudging ritual was incorporated into some of the itineraries.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter, recognizing traditional Native religions and practices were integral to Native American cultures, signed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (Bubar, 2006). This Act created hope among Native Peoples, as the right to worship freely is a critical component of social unity. In Washington State, Initiative 901 was passed in 2005 banning smoking in all public places but included an exemption for the use of incense, smudge sticks, smudge bowls, ceremonial pipes, or similar equipment when used as part of a bonafide religious ceremony in a location that otherwise meets the definition of a public place. The city where the building is located is leased by a tribal consortium, and the building owners prohibit smoking in or near the building.

The supervisor, Anna, viewed herself as a fair, objective individual. She understood that any decision she made might have potential consequences. She believed in the creation of a process that would allow all parties to share their opinions. However, she also recognized that her opinion, although valid, would need to be set aside to facilitate an equitable solution.

References

- Bubar, R.W., & Vernon, I. S. (2006). *Contemporary Native Issues: Social life and issues*. Chelsea House.
- Collins, C. (2010). *Toxic Loopholes: Failures and prospects for environmental law*. Cambridge University Press.
- McGaa, E. (1990). *Mother Earth Spirituality: Native American paths to healing ourselves and our world*. Harper Collins.
- McKenna, R. (2006). Interpretation and Implementation: Initiative Measure 901. Retrieved from:
<http://www.indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/wa.org/sites/default/files/attachments/AG%20opinion%206%208%2006.pdf>
- O'Brien, C. (2008). *Religion and Healing in Native America: Pathways for renewal*. Praeger.
- Renee, J. (2010). *Sacred Smoke: Smudging (An ancient art for modern times)*. Retrieved from: <http://www.luminearth.com/2010/02/15/sacred-smoke-smudging-an-ancient-art-for-modern-times/>
- Warry, W. (1998). *Unfinished dreams: Community healing and the reality of Aboriginal self-government*. University of Toronto Press.