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Teaching Corporate Yoga: It's NOT Your Typical Yoga Class

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Recent health care reforms show more companies than ever are proactively looking for ways to support the wellbeing of their employees -- and what better way than yoga? In addition to serving the function of both body and mind, yoga is a practice that can be done with very little space, minimal equipment, and an avoidable wardrobe change in a desk-format. This wellness practice seems like a pretty obvious choice. But before the first class is introduced, yoga teachers need to think through the dynamics of the workplace and adjust how they teach so their offering is legal, appropriate, and safe.

I know it's easy to think, "Hey, yoga is yoga, what is so different about teaching in companies?" or, "A lot of my students have corporate jobs, what's the big deal?" When I first started offering corporate yoga through my company Balance Integration over 10 years ago, I realized a LOT had to be taken into consideration and modified. When I share these insights through our teacher intensives, even teachers who are former corporate executives, or work with corporate folks in studios or 1:1s, are surprised by how much more is at stake.

It first occurred to me that yoga teachers need guidance on how to serve in corporate or work settings about a year into teaching in corporations. At the time, Balance had grown from offering just a few classes in NYC to working in locations around the country. This growth forced us to go from me teaching every class, to building a team of top-notch instructors. One day, I dropped by a midday class another teacher on our team was teaching and observed the following:

- She brought a friend with her to the class.
- She was wearing a skimpy yoga tank and little yoga boy-shorts.
- She wrote a quote from a religious figure on the conference room white board.
- She encouraged students to engage mula bandha, explaining it as being akin to doing a "kegel" with detail on both reproductive and eliminatory organs.
- She assisted a child's pose by laying her body upon the student's torso.
- She used Sanskrit throughout the class.
- She announced a student's modification for a specific injury.
- After savasana she wrapped things up with a chant to the hindu deity Ganesh.

It struck me: This instructor had no idea that these choices were dangerous to the prospect of offering yoga in a work setting. Her natural way of being as a teacher had been refined

over years of teaching in some of the top studios in the country, leading retreats worldwide, and working with corporate employees in all of those settings. She had even worked in corporate America before leaving to follow the call to teach yoga. But somehow, like so many of us, she had missed that where you teach must be considered in crafting how you teach.

All of these practices are lovely and wonderful in a neutral or studio setting. But my heart dropped further with each element I noted above. Most of what I listed could have not only gotten the program cancelled, robbing hard working employees of a much-needed release, but could have resulted in lawsuits of multiple varieties. While we all might agree that this world is overly litigious and that yoga should be a safe space from that sort of thinking, we have to face that working in the world means understanding it as it is. Rather than judging or rejecting the parameters that make these actions risky in work environments, we must consider exactly why each is the case, and figure out how to teach authentically even when we can't do the things we would normally do in a yoga class.

Anytime a yoga teacher goes into a work environment they need to know why these choices don't work, and deeply consider how to keep the spirit of the practice alive even in navigating those constraints. In my heart, I knew that with every uninformed choice by a well-meaning instructor, we collectively come one step closer to sensationalistic lawsuits that endanger the longevity of and relief made possible by workplace yoga. Testing my instinct, I enlisted the help of a respected employment attorney to troubleshoot my assessment of how employment and health information regulations impact the content of yoga classes in workplace environments and she agreed.

Although there are many factors in workplace environments that mandate that we teach differently in any workplace -- not just corporations -- sticking to basics consider the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (<http://www.eeoc.gov/employees/index.cfm>). This organization and corresponding act ensures that no employee will experience discrimination due to race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information. This means that organizations are prohibited from fostering an environment that an employee can perceive to be discriminatory. What's more, the EEOC also dictates that workplaces be free of harassment by managers, co-workers, or others in the workplace, because of race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information. Employees are also protected from denial of a reasonable workplace accommodation that they need because of religious beliefs or disability. And they are protected from retaliation if they complain about job discrimination, or assisted with a job discrimination investigation or lawsuit. These provisions not only apply to management but also to the vendors they retain, and as a corporate yoga teacher that means you.

So what does that mean when it comes to yoga? Let's first consider the EEO reference to religion. The reference to non-discrimination with respect to religion means that spiritual

references may be experienced by an employee as discriminatory. Typical yoga practice elements such as chanting in Sanskrit or referencing religious texts can be perceived as a religious bias. The protections from discrimination based on sex (and pregnancy) and disabilities mean we can't ask who in the room is pregnant or if anyone is injured, so common a practice in any yoga or fitness class. When you fold in the non-harassment aspect of the act, we also have to guard against creating a sexually-charged environment through our clothing, hands-on adjustments and avoid making anatomical references that may make employees uncomfortable. Additionally, we can't teach with reference to what may work well for the women in the room in contrast with what may work for the guys, or call out a modification because we see a physical limitation due to age or ability on the behalf of a specific student.

Thinking through these dynamics, it is clear we not only have to understand the relational and legal implications of workplace yoga, but we need to consider the mind-set many of our students maintain when at work. Will using a student to demonstrate exacerbate competitiveness for those present? Might someone feel singled out when repeatedly corrected in practice? As teachers we have to understand and have empathy for these common workplace dynamics, and develop strategies to keep all present safe without inciting such insecurities. We have to study and refine our skills with respect to prop-less modifications and "Hands Off" adjustments. We need to rethink how we integrate inspiration without conveying religious bias, how we address injuries, and even how we start and end classes.

I strongly believe that there is a natural place for yoga to be taught in work environments. Put simply, the parameters described above are not limiting factors, simply factors for teachers to learn, understand and respect. By doing so and strategizing how to be true to the practice we love, we can deliver the benefits of yoga without violating the rights and protections guaranteed to employees.

If you're interested in joining us to learn more about teaching in workplace environments, we've got an intensive coming up in NYC March 8. Please check out the details here: <http://yogaworks.com/events/workshops/ny/2014/march%202014/corporate%20yoga%20teacher%20training>.

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