

Bulletin Board: Out-of-control holiday parties can end with regrets

by Amy_Winter

Office holiday parties are a time to celebrate the festive season and enjoy the company of colleagues outside of work. But sometimes these parties can get out of hand, causing embarrassment or even serious crimes.

Craig Annunziata, managing partner of Fisher & Phillips, a labor and employment law firm, says most parties take place at night with unlimited access to alcohol. The overuse of alcohol can cause people to do or say inappropriate things, whether it is verbal, physical or sexual.

"When alcohol enters into the mix," says Annunziata, "things happen."

Foolish behavior is most common at parties; however, more critical situations can result from holiday gatherings. Large consumptions of alcohol can lead to involvement in drunken-driving accidents or sexual harassment situations. Annunziata represented a woman who was sexually harassed by her boss at a Christmas office party. When she refused his advances, he threatened to fire her.

To avoid potential lawsuits, Annunziata recommends these tips to employees and managers in order to keep the party atmosphere fun but under control:

- Bring along your spouse or significant other, who will deter you from making dumb decisions.

- Avoid an open bar. Limit drinks to no more than two by using a ticket system.

- Hire a professional bartender. He or she can monitor the amount of drinks and ask for identification for those under 21.

- Stay away from the after-party. Discourage any post celebrating, especially for management.

- Provide transportation for intoxicated employees. Arrange for a taxi service to pick up those who are unable to drive home.

In preparation for the evening holiday party, send instructive e-mails to workers detailing the party rules. Annunziata advises that managers re-emphasize the consequences for improper behavior.

Office holiday parties aren't limited to evening-only events. Annunziata suggests having an office luncheon with no alcohol. Following the meal, managers could even send employees home for the day as a holiday treat.

A post-party survey can also be informative. This gives employees the opportunity to express uncomfortable situations or concerns regarding the party atmosphere. Management can then use the suggestions in order to make next year's gathering more enjoyable.

HOLIDAY GIFT TIPS

Office holiday parties might mean bringing gifts to show appreciation and spread holiday cheer. But how do workers and managers decide what is both appropriate and meaningful?

Fifty-six percent of managers plan on handing out gifts to workers, although 9 percent feel forced to participate, according to a CareerBuilder.com survey. The types of presents vary. Gift cards/money came in first, followed by holiday candy, decorations or ornaments, books, wine/alcohol, food baskets and gag gifts.

When it comes to workers, 29 percent want to hand out gifts to their bosses, with only 5 percent feeling obligated. For boss presents, money and gift cards were most popular, food baskets and wine came in second, and the third most popular went to office items, such as business card holders.

Some strange workplace presents that turned up in the survey included:

- Package of over-the-counter medicines.

- Underwear.

- Used cookbook with food stains on it.

- Used makeup.

- A voodoo doll.

- What Would Jesus Do? bracelet.

Rosemary Haefner, vice president of human resources, provides tips from CareerBuilder.com and ShopLocal experts to help workers find the perfect and proper present:

- Seek information on gift-giving policies. Make sure you are aware of any rules regarding the gift exchange.

- Steer clear of questionable gifts. Keep with more traditional ideas that are not likely to be offensive.

- Opt for making a charity donation. Instead of giving gifts in the office, give to a person or family in need.

- Go for quality. It is nice to get bargains, but make sure the present isn't broken or cheap.

For more information visit www.careerbuilder.com.

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