



Mind manners at holiday office parties

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It's the season for workplace holiday parties, which offer a great way to unwind and get to know co-workers better.

But employees have to remember that they're still attending a work event. Even though it's called a party, it's not the time to let loose. You're on stage, being observed by co-workers, supervisors and maybe even a few board members or clients.

A holiday party doesn't mean being stiff and formal. It just means presenting yourself as a courteous and likable person, no matter how businesslike you may be in the office.

Here are some ways you can buff up your party manners to look impressive and avoid career-sabotaging faux pas.

First things first: It's polite to let your host know if you're planning to attend. Much time and effort goes into planning holiday parties, so phone or e-mail your RSVP within 24 hours. Then, once you commit, plan to be there. It's a good way to show support and loyalty to your organization.

Dress appropriately: The key word here is understated. Even if the invitation says "cocktail attire," leave anything too flashy or provocative in the closet.

Also, think about where you're coming from to help you plan your attire. When the office party is during the workday, choose something a little dressier but still conservative. Add a slight holiday touch by wearing a pair of standout heels, a statement necklace or a festive tie. For parties that allow time to come from home, you can wear something dressier than office attire.

Mix and mingle: Always greet your boss and peers, but also take time to learn about others. Even though it's comfortable to hang out with those you know, try to build rapport with two or three people from outside your immediate work area. And if the gathering is small, try to speak to every person at the party. The boss will appreciate you for helping everyone have fun.

In large companies or organizations, the holiday party is usually the only time during the year when you may have a chance to talk casually with senior management. Spend a few minutes on relationship building so that upper management can see your spark, professionalism and passionate direction for your career.

No small talk drama: A recent Harris Interactive survey found that 47 percent of office party attendees heard a co-worker use excessive profanity, and 44 percent observed co-workers sharing inappropriate personal information about themselves or other colleagues. So keep conversations light and upbeat by not complaining about co-workers, the boss, the company or the food - even if it's bad. It's also good to avoid talking about controversial hot-button issues or gloomy economic news.

Eat and drink with finesse: One thing you can count on at office parties is that food and drink will be involved. And one of the toughest obstacles people face is deciding whether to drink. If an employee drinks at all, it's best to limit alcohol consumption to no more than two drinks.

When it comes to food, you want to appear professional and polished. First, don't pile your hors d'oeuvre plate when you go through the food line. If necessary, eat a little something before you get there so you don't

appear too hungry. Also, choose finger foods that aren't too greasy or sticky and that are easily eaten in one or two bites.

Keep your beverage napkin tucked under your plate for easy access to wipe your fingers. You always want to be ready for a hand shake, so it's a good idea to keep your food or beverage in your left hand.

Show gratitude: Gratitude shows respect and always makes a good impression. So, before you leave, say goodbye and thank the host or party organizers. Better yet, follow up the next day with a handwritten thank you note.

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