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Making your office party merry

Tips on getting more mingling at the gala and avoiding boorish booze-ups

Now that the holiday season is in full force, you may be reminiscing about holiday parties past. That time your drunken co-workers made merry beneath the holiday tree in the hotel foyer, or the year before when, regrettably, your spouse fell asleep at dinner.



Terry Pithers and Joanne Blake run the Edmonton business-etiquette firm Style For Success.

If you've ever thought you could plan a better shindig, perhaps this is the year to roll up your sleeves. Not only will getting involved help prevent party atrocities, but it may also be the career booster you've been looking for, say experts.

"It gives you an opportunity to meet others in your organization, provides opportunities for you to be recognized, and it creates teamwork," says Joanne Blake, who runs Edmonton business-etiquette firm Style For Success with partner Terry Pithers. "It's a good career-enhancing move." After volunteering to make it happen, one of the first things you should do is start a planning committee, says Blake. This makes the process easier and gets more people involved in the decision making.

Follow this up with a quick e-mail questionnaire to gauge everybody's preferences.

In Blake's experience, about half of office parties are held in the office, since it's more convenient. "But taking it out of the office creates a memorable experience," she says. It's also easier to involve clients and spouses.

While hotel ballrooms are a traditional choice, investigate creative options for a different experience — like hosting a night of theatre (whether the classic kind or dinner theatre), which can blend an ice-breaking planned activity with mingling.

Tips on getting more mingling at the gala and avoiding boorish booze-ups - continued

Wherever you host your event, be conscious of the layout of the room. Pithers recalls an office party he attended where the couches were placed in a long line, which made mingling awkward. Using cocktail tables without the chairs gives people a place to rest drinks and food, but encourages people to move around.

Also make sure the size of the room matches the size of the party. A cavernous hotel ballroom doesn't encourage people to be social.

Taking a party out of the office inevitably increases the odds of something going wrong — particularly when alcohol is involved. But rather than making it a dry affair, Pithers recommends using subtle strategies to draw attention away from the booze and remind people to be responsible.

Instead of an open bar, place a couple of bottles of wine at each table or offer people a couple of drink tickets, which "sends a subliminal message that that's the limit — you're paying for it after that."

He says more office parties these days are offering interesting non-alcoholic drinks both as a prize to designated drivers and to remind everyone else that other beverages can be just as enjoyable. Fancy coffees or mocktails are a refreshing alternative to pop and plain coffee.

About half of all office parties are held during office hours, but if you're organizing sometime after hours, don't host your event on the weekend, as people may have other holiday commitments or simply want the days to recharge.

"These days, people are so conscious about having very little time," says Pithers. "A lot of people don't want to give up their weekends, so a Friday or Saturday night isn't great."

More and more parties are being held before the holiday season or in January or February, which can make things easier for both organizers and partygoers.

Blake recommends including both the start and end time on the invitation, to avoid people showing up before the organizers are ready for them, and to give them a sense of how much time to set aside. She adds that partygoers should avoid showing up early or being the last to leave. "It demonstrates you have nothing else in your life," she says.

When choosing a menu for the party, include vegetarian options and alternatives for people with allergies, and be attentive to the appetizers. "I think it's important to have a conversation with a caterer to make sure they're truly finger foods that can be consumed in one bite," says Blake. Otherwise things get messy, fast.

When it comes to organized speeches, don't let them ramble. "Make sure they're done early in the evening and that they're short and positive," says Pithers.

The choice to assign seating in advance depends on the nature of the party, but especially if clients are invited, it can relax people. Consider seating a more outgoing person near a shy person to make them feel comfortable and act as an unofficial host.

If the party isn't too formal, organizing ice-breaker activities can make people feel more comfortable, says Blake. She suggests a "secret Santa" variant in which people buy and wrap a small, neutral gift under a certain price and presents are traded.

"It's light, it's fun and it's engaging."

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