

How to work the office party

Start by showing up

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It's time for the office holiday party again! Now don't groan. Not only do you get to make merry with your co-workers, the event can help you climb the corporate ladder if you know how to work it. (Of course, it's also fraught with career-limiting possibilities for the foolhardy.)

HERE ARE 10 TIPS ON HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THE OCCASION:

1. **SHOW UP** If you're naughty and ditch the party, you won't meet people who can help boost your career. You may also disappoint your boss who was no doubt counting on you to make a valued client feel welcome. However, if you're nice and show up to entertain the boring yet important client, your boss is bound to reward your team spirit.
2. **MEET THE EXECUTIVES** Where else will a lowly middle manager have such a perfect opportunity to rub shoulders with senior executives? Perhaps your group vice-president knows the company president and can make an introduction. If not, you can still introduce yourself in many cases.

"To begin, let the president know who you are and the department you work in," recommends Bonnie Gross, president of SpeechScience, a Toronto-based company that provides communications training. "Then, offer a compliment on a recent accomplishment or speech the president gave."

However, refrain from sharing your brilliant insights on what the company is doing wrong. Contrary to what you might think, the president won't appreciate your candor.

3. **CIRCULATE MIX AND MINGLE WITH MANY PEOPLE.** "If you just chase down the president, it will be so obvious," warns Karen Mallett, partner in The Civility Group, a Winnipeg-based firm that teaches business etiquette.

Remember, it is not just the executives who can help you. The mailman and the executive assistant can make your job a whole lot easier, too.

4. **KEEP CONVERSATION LIGHT** "Talk life, not business," says Mark Ferrier, president of Traffik Brand Communications Inc., a Toronto-based marketing

communications company. Safe topics tend to be the weather, sports or something you heard on television. Ask questions of the other person to show you're interested and engaged in the conversation. But avoid contentious topics, including politics, sex and religion.

"If you must talk business, keep it at a high level. The last thing people want to do is sip eggnog and talk about how the budget didn't balance," Mr. Ferrier explains.

5. MAKE CONTACT BUT DON'T TRY TO CLOSE A DEAL Say you connect well with a potential client. Super, but don't try to close the deal under the mistletoe. Make plans to talk about business details at a later date. If you promise to send an e-mail, get someone a report, etc., then follow through. Make sure you don't promise what you can't deliver. People tend to do that when they start drinking. "If you don't know Burton Cummings, don't say you can arrange dinner with him," Ms. Mallett warns.

6. BE CULTURALLY SENSITIVE Everyone likes to receive well wishes, but be sensitive to the fact different people celebrate different holidays.

"Rather than wishing someone 'Merry Christmas,' which is unique to one culture, it's better to say 'Happy Holidays,' which is inclusive of all cultures," says Dave Crisp, chief executive of Crisp Strategies Inc., a Toronto-based leadership consultancy.

7. DRESS APPROPRIATELY Yes, it's a party, but it's still a work function. So keep that in mind. At a holiday party James Popel attended several years ago, a senior executive brought a date dressed in an asymmetric purple mini-skirt paired with a purple mesh top, minus appropriate undergarment.

"She got attention, but not the right kind of attention," says Mr. Popel, who now works in Winnipeg as vice-president of human resources at Wardrop, an engineering consulting firm. Instead, opt for a work-appropriate outfit you look good in. Read the invitation for the dress code. And guys, semi-formal does not mean jeans, a T-shirt and runners.

8. EAT MODERATELY Remember, you are at the party to meet and greet. So don't spend the whole time at the food station. It's not polite and you will miss networking opportunities. "Eat a little something before the event to avoid arriving famished. Then you'll reach for one canape instead of three," Ms. Gross advises.

Furthermore, when engaged in conversation, take a pass on puff pastries, which are likely to leave a trail of crumbs, and greasy foods, which result in greasy hands. And at all costs avoid talking with your mouth full.

9. Be MEMORABLE, NOT REMEMBERED You want to be memorable -- meaning friendly, engaging and outgoing -- but not remembered for an incident. It will haunt you forever.

Mr. Ferrier still remembers the names of the two people who had sex in the bathroom at a holiday party of the first company he worked for years ago.

Mr. Popel recalls one holiday party held at a president's home where a senior programmer got very drunk, went upstairs and passed out on the president's bed. When the president's wife woke him, he started telling her off and listing all the things he didn't like about the company. "He didn't get fired but it was a close call," Mr. Popel says.

10. MAKE A GRACEFUL EXIT First, stay at the party an appropriate amount of time -- at least an hour and a half, recommends Ms. Mallett. (If you bolt after 15 minutes, people will notice.) Then, before you leave, approach the people you spoke with and bid them farewell. That's a much classier exit than just walking out of the room -- and one that leaves a good last impression.

BONUS -- MAKE SAFETY A PRIORITY Employers have responsibility for employee safety. "If you see that Harry has had a few too many, find the party organizer and let her know that Harry needs a taxi chit. You'll make an impression on your host as a sensible and responsible person," Mr. Crisp says.

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