

The Office Party, as a Tightrope Walk

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Published: November 25, 2007

IMAGINE trying to plan a dinner party for 20 people with different dietary needs. Or think about organizing a wedding reception where both bride and groom have their share of fractious family members, and the new in-laws don't get along.

You're getting a taste of the challenges that employers face as they plan holiday festivities for a diverse group of workers.

These employees may have work skills in common, but when it comes to social styles, religions and personal schedules, all bets are off — and many employees are increasingly comfortable making their priorities known.

Employees may criticize company celebrations as being too overtly Christian — or not Christian enough. Managers may have to contend with sexual harassment complaints or liability problems after overly lively events. The calendar itself may also create conflicts if employees cannot take time off to observe their holidays.

It's enough to make some managers wish that the Grinch had succeeded after all.

Nowhere are the hazards of workplace holiday celebrations more apparent than at parties, particularly those held at night. I have certainly attended my share of office shindigs that involved trooping off to some nearby restaurant to eat, drink, dance and gossip. Someone might spend too much time at the bar, add comic relief and be embarrassed the next day. But for most of us, these parties offered a nice chance to unwind with friends and colleagues.

At many companies, though, evening holiday parties have become truly problematic. If the employer invites spouses, for example, gay employees may feel uncomfortable, with or without a partner in tow. Parents of young children may not want to attend a late-night event.

Employees who drink too much increase their risk of being in an accident while driving home and, if they are, their employers could face some liability. (Some companies actually appoint monitors to keep an eye on the proceedings, making guests feel as if they are at a seventh-grade mixer.)

And, of course, the risk of sexual harassment is high. "We used to talk about harassment as a seasonal business because we got a flood of calls after holiday parties," said Freada Kapor Klein, a consultant and diversity expert and the author of "Giving Notice: Why the Best and Brightest

Are Leaving the Workforce and How You Can Help Them Stay.” “Drinking, middle-aged men, young women in cocktail dresses and no spouses around — what were these companies thinking?”

Not surprisingly, a survey by Challenger, Gray & Christmas, the outplacement counseling firm, found that 42 percent of companies were planning parties for the daytime rather than the evening this year, and that more than half were not planning to serve alcohol. Another survey, by the executive search firm Battalia Winston, had similar findings.

Some companies add certifiably uncontroversial elements to holiday observances, like philanthropy. Sony Pictures Entertainment festoons trees on its corporate campus with decorations made by children in a local Head Start program, said Janice Pober, the company’s senior vice president for corporate social responsibility. The backs of the decorations have wish lists from the children, and employees are invited to shop for the desired gifts.

The company later holds a wrapping party for employees to prepare the gifts, and then a party for the children and any employees who wish to come. About 200 of [Sony](#)’s 3,000 employees in the area attend, and a larger number contribute gifts, Ms. Pober said.

But even when holiday party controversies are minimized, there are other minefields, like decorations. There is always a chance that someone will accessorize a desk or cubicle in a way that distracts or offends others. (Ever spent a few hours around a colleague’s talking toy animal in a red hat?)

As for public adornments, most companies make sure that if they have a Christmas tree in the lobby, there are also symbols of other faiths and traditions. And they may try to come up with more neutral, yet still festive, decorations.

“Poinsettias have become very politically correct,” said Dale Winston, the chief executive of Battalia Winston, who is based in New York. “They don’t even have to be red.”

Cox Communications, at its office in Parma, Ohio, displays what it calls a diversity tree, said Stacie Schafer, a company spokeswoman. Employees bring decorations with symbols from their cultures, and this year everyone will also help create a garland for the tree, she said.

Nice touch. But decorations are unlikely to appease employees who want days off to observe non-Christian holidays. Many companies give employees floating days off that can be used for holiday observances, but depending on when the holidays fall, those days may or may not be easy to use.

The best way for managers to navigate this season is to establish a year-round culture of respect for everyone, and to plan holiday celebrations that reflect the makeup of the workplace. A stuffy luncheon may not work for the young employees of a new technology company, and rowdy nighttime events may flop in other workplaces.

It is also worth remembering that while it may be hard to plan holiday celebrations, many people genuinely like to mark the season with colleagues as well as with friends and family.

The holidays are the “one time of year you can let down your hair and socialize,” said Ms. Winston, who provides a holiday lunch and an afternoon off to her staff. “There’s not enough socializing left in corporate America. It’s gotten very serious.”