



Etiquette: 'Tis the Season

Don't jeopardize your job with etiquette faux pas and social gaffes at the holiday office party.

Be there or be square.

The annual company holiday party is coming up. Do you attend, even if you don't want to?

Answer: Yes!

Unless there is illness or a prior commitment that can't be broken, your attendance is considered obligatory, not optional. Companies host holiday events, from modest gatherings to lavish galas, for many reasons, among them to thank their employees, to celebrate the season, to emphasize teamwork, and to boost morale. You demonstrate your respect and appreciation by showing up.

Because a company event can be a minefield of manners and social skills, here are things to know for when you've received the invite.

RSVP. First, be considerate. Reply to the invitation as soon as possible so the planning committee can do its job. If your plans change, notify them; organization and budgets may be involved.

What to wear. Check the invite, ask, or follow your supervisor's lead. Is the event black tie/formal, semi-formal, business formal, cocktail, dressy casual, or casual? Perhaps a conservative suit, a classy dress, or casual with a moderately festive red tie or blouse. No plunging necklines, excessive bling, or strong cologne. Be professional; show you have taste.

Guests. If the invitation doesn't say "and Guest," spouse/significant other, or kids, don't ask. There may be legitimate reasons why the company has not included them.

Your ETA. Arrive within 15-30 minutes of the event, stay for at least 45 minutes to an hour. Otherwise, it may appear that you don't care enough. Also, don't be the first or last to leave.

Eat, drink, and mingle. The purpose is to interact, and socialize with your employer and associates outside of the work realm. Move about, chat, SMILE. Be pleasant. In general, limit conversations with any one person or group to five minutes to avoid monopolizing others' time and yours.

Network. Use this opportunity to meet people and develop new relationships (see Networking: 101). Strike up conversations with strangers. A holiday event may be the only time you'll see the CEO and upper management. Introduce yourself, express your appreciation for your job, and thank them for the invitation. Who knows? It may lead to greater visibility and a step up.

Don't gobble 'til you wobble. Moderation, people! This is not the time to load up on hors d'oeuvres and finger food. Same goes for the alcohol: a two drink max, if any. This isn't a keg party. Becoming the life of the party could result in the death of your reputation. Hold drinks in your left hand so your right one isn't cold and wet when you shake hands. And don't double-dip!

Don't talk shop. This is not the time to review in-depth details of the latest project or business transaction. Don't gossip, complain, use off-color language, or ask for a raise. And, steer away from potentially controversial topics like politics, religion, and race. They're called "holiday" parties to be festive and all-inclusive.

Nothing naughty. Remember, an office party is STILL a business event, and professional behavior is mandatory. Who knows who might be watching, not to mention those security cameras. Be remembered for the right reason.

Say, "Thank you!" Don't leave without thanking your employer, host/hostess, or party organizers. If appropriate, send a thank you card. You'll never be faulted for being sincere, polite, and appreciative.

Follow up. Contact people if you agreed to do so at the party.

If you enjoy yourself and have a great time, terrific! If not, and you hate being there, well, grin and bear it. It'll be over soon for another year and you will have taken the higher ground.



i n a nutshell:

Remember, office parties — holiday or not — are still business events, so mind your manners:

- **RSVP in a timely fashion**
- **Dress appropriately**
- **Don't arrive too late; don't leave too early or too late**
- **Be pleasant with small talk**
- **Network and socialize**
- **Watch the alcohol; it's about the fellowship, not the food**
- **Avoid anything intimate, illegal, or idiotic**
- **Thank appropriate persons**

Don't sink your career by colliding with an iceberg of ignorance.