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Career Couch

Forced Fun? The Limits of Office Celebrations

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

Q. It seems there's a cake in the conference room every week celebrating a birthday, a new baby or a wedding engagement. Are personal celebrations appropriate at work?

A. Yes, but in moderation. We spend a lot of time with our co-workers, so it is natural to want to note life events and achievements with them. It is also a morale booster, providing a chance to step away from your desk for a while and have some fun.

“People are so used to dealing with computers and not human beings; celebrations give us a chance to be human again, to connect with others in the organization,” said Peter Handal, chairman of Dale Carnegie Training, a company in Hauppauge, N.Y., that focuses on interpersonal skills.

But frequent celebrations can also cause resentment, if employees are continually asked to make financial contributions or if parties interfere with work.

“When it's forced, it's not fun,” said Kate Zabriskie, president of Business Training Works, a consulting firm in Washington that specializes in business etiquette.

“If you don't have time to plan your kids' birthday party,” she said, “you don't want to be forced to help plan a party for someone who isn't really your friend.”

Q. What is the best way for a manager to handle celebrations at work?

A. That depends largely on the corporate culture. If you aren't sure what's acceptable, ask the human resources department for guidance.

To keep the number of parties on work time to a minimum, many companies have a monthly birthday cake to honor all employee birthdays that month. Other businesses allow departments or groups to celebrate birthdays and other events as they choose.

The best celebrations are small, spontaneous and creative, said Steve Harrison, the author of “The Manager's Book of Decencies: How Small Gestures Build Great Companies” and the chairman of Lee Hecht Harrison, a global career management consultancy in Woodcliff Lake, N.J.

“It needs to be intimate,” Mr. Harrison said. “On the group level you all know each other, and that makes celebrations rich and culturally important. These are not the stuff of policy manuals; they are unscripted and have their own charm, depending on the character of the department or group.”

Q. How should you solicit contributions from co-workers so that they don't feel forced to give?

A. Make it as anonymous as possible. Send an e-mail message asking those interested in contributing to stop by your office and put a contribution in a box or envelope.

If possible, put the envelope or box in a place where contributions can be made discreetly, said Ann Marie Sabath, president of At Ease Inc., a business etiquette training firm in New York and author of “One Minute Manners: Quick Answers to the Most Awkward Situations You'll Ever Face at Work.”

It is best to suggest a range of donations instead of leaving the amount open. But keep in mind that not everyone in your department earns the same salary. “It should probably never be more than an hour of someone’s time,” Ms. Zabriskie said.

Q. How can you decline to give money toward a party or a gift for a co-worker without hurting your reputation?

A. Thank the person in charge of collecting for including you in the party plans and say that you are already doing something on your own. And make sure that you are doing something.

It doesn’t have to be expensive — a card or a small gift is enough, Ms. Sabath said.

You can also be politely blunt, said Leah Ingram, an etiquette and protocol consultant and author of “The Everything Etiquette Book.” Rather than offering a litany of excuses, Ms. Ingram said, “simply say, ‘Thanks for including me but I’m on a strict budget.’ ”

“You can also offer to do something nonmonetary,” she added, “like helping with setup or baking brownies.”

Q. Must you attend every celebration?

A. No, but be strategic about the ones you do attend, advised Stephanie Marston, a psychotherapist, workplace management consultant and author of the CD program and workbook “30 Days to Sanity: Balancing Competing Demands in Our Hectic Everyday Lives.”

Although you have every right to avoid celebrations, Ms. Marston said, it is a good idea, from a political standpoint, to show up for some. If you don’t, you risk being seen as uncooperative and not as a team player. “You’re in a business situation; you need to have good relationships,” she said.

Q. If it’s a celebration for your boss or supervisor, do you have to participate, even if you can’t stand him or her? And what about a gift?

A. You should participate. “Buck up and realize this is part of survival in an office,” said Ken Siegel, an organizational psychologist and chief executive of the Impact Group, a management consultancy in Beverly Hills, Calif.

If you give an individual gift to the boss, make sure that it isn’t overly elaborate or personal — and never give clothing, unless it is something with the corporate logo.

“A good thing to do is make a donation to their favorite charity or their alma mater,” Ms. Ingram said. “This way you acknowledge their birthday, but you don’t risk embarrassing them or yourself.”

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