

Office Parties

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Why do companies have office parties? They want to raise morale, let employees (sometimes the families) get to know each other socially, say thank you, or just create a break from work. The gatherings can be as simple as hot dogs on a beach or as elaborate as an elegant dinner at a hotel.

Do you have to go? In general, it's considered bad form to skip it. That wasn't an invitation in your mail. It was a command.

Office parties can be a blast or not your idea of a good time. A young, single staff parties differently than employees with kids or a group closer to retirement. It may not be your ideal mix; however, you can make new friendships or cement old ones, learn more about the people you work with, or just have fun. Go, unless you have a rock-solid reason to stay home.

Work friendships matter. You get things done through people, so make new friends. The higher you go in the company, the more your affability counts. Be charming. Tell funny stories. Talk sports with those who love them, and encourage potty training tales in the family section. Talk shop in the corner where they can't seem to let go, even for a few hours. You hurt your career when you are boorish because you're always that way, not just when you had too much bourbon slush; when you stay aloof or stumble through conversation, when you appear to want to be anywhere but at this event.

The eyes of the company are on you, however. Remember, you're still at work and stay in control of yourself. What you do will be remembered. I was at a company picnic where the freely flowing beer suddenly made a cow-chip-tossing contest on a nearby field seem like a keen idea. It was fun till the accountant started choosing softer chips and throwing them at his opponents, suspiciously wide of his mark! Bent on beer-y revenge, one group of chuckers put soft cow pies on his car's floor, near the gas pedal. Another waited till he went into the port-a-potty and then tipped it over! Twenty years and many promotions and transfers later, the re-telling of that story still raises back-slapping guffaws. How do you want to be remembered within your company?

Is the office party a good chance to suck up? Yes and no. The yes is that every encounter is an opportunity, whether you're playing poker or lugging in cases of soda. The no is that obvious sucking up is a turn-off to the people you're trying to impress. The smart ones among them see through your clumsy effort to play the game; the stupid upper crusts will think you truly admire them.

These gatherings are opportunities to have fun, with your behavior tempered by the realization this is the office without cubicles. Be thoughtful and charming. Behave appropriately. You'll live to party another day.