

Holiday parties are fraught with peril; inviting HR doesn't help



Through Glazed Eyes

By [Adam J. Glazer](#)

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For reasons I don't understand, this year's holiday party has been entrusted to me.

Wait, on second thought, I do understand. I'm in charge of the holiday party by default. No one else wanted to do it. And the party's decision-making has been rife with conflict.

Should I keep my partners happy and go low-budget with a bar open only briefly and serve well liquor or perhaps just beer and wine? Or do we indulge the masses and get an easy morale boost by pouring top-shelf booze and keeping the drinks flowing throughout?

That decision really wasn't so hard; well drinks, but the bar stays open. Now, what about the menu?

Well, how profitable was 2018? Does the party open with pigs-in-a-blanket and veggies dipped in buttermilk ranch or can we splurge with crabcakes and rack of lamb?

I realize I'm getting ahead of myself. Before selecting the holiday grub, we must consider the turnout. Certain lawyers always find a pretense to be away for this annual event, and rarely are they missed.

Others start asking about it in August. These are usually the same lawyers or paralegals or staff who act as guardians of the firm flame by ensuring certain traditions get upheld.

Think fraternity pledges or rookies on a baseball team. If they had to sing when they joined the firm, this year's new crop will sing. The bar must stay open solely to loosen these newbies up. A one and a two...

Between the two extremes are the folks who attend holiday parties because they (1) are afraid to be talked about if they're absent; (2) couldn't stand to miss what Larry does this year — and who he does it to — when he gets overserved; (3) hope to score points by engaging certain big shots in witty, out-of-office banter, perhaps at Larry's expense; or (4) tolerate it as their vehicle to the much more entertaining post-party.

Once the party starts, even attorneys accustomed to attending networking events and schmoozing at client functions, find the compulsory mingling with all echelons of the firm lurks as a tripwire.

Can a senior partner really engage the office messenger without seeming awkward, patronizing or worse? "Hey, Carly. It is Carly, right? How was your court run this morning?" he asks. "What's that? You're Maria, my partner, and sit just down the hall?"

Meanwhile, ambitious associate Dawn spots her friend Olivia yukking it up with her partners, including Steve, who just brought in the Double-Edged Sword matter. Dawn carefully plots her approach.

"Excuse me, folks, and happy holidays," she begins, raising her glass. "You know, Steve, I'd love the opportunity to work with you next year."

Before she even finishes her pitch, Olivia, sensing the obsequious tone, leads the others away, leaving Steve feeling uncomfortable and abandoned. "That's a super idea, Dawn," he snarls back, as the reverberations from her backfired plan nearly knocks her over. "Let's talk on Monday?"

Slinking away, it dawns on Dawn that a holiday party may not be the perfect venue to review work assignments. Then she redirects her ire, remembering Steve is the same partner who closed out last year's party with his tie wrapped around his forehead doing shots with Larry to the strains of Luke Bryan's "Drink a Beer."

The appetizers are disappearing quickly, and I notice Joe from accounting, who was violently blowing his nose this morning and sneezing on the firm's financial statement, double-dipping into the guacamole. Time to put down my tortilla chip and start the proceedings.

Tradition dictates I deliver the annual toast. In past years, others seemed to wing it, offering with various degrees of insincerity some version of the rote thank you: "We owe this year's successes to each and every person in this room." Apparently, they even meant Larry.

Not this year. I have no intention of toasting each and every firm member. Instead, I salute certain pockets within the firm.

"Here's to those of you who refuse to remove the staples from your documents before dropping them into the copiers. Your consideration in keeping the Canon repair folks fully employed is certainly noted."

And I toast "the elite few who help themselves to anything they find in the office refrigerator when no one's looking. Your devotion to reducing the calorie intake of your colleagues is recognized."

To stay timely, I humbly salute the prescient firm icons who, at the close of 2018, "have the fortitude to continue centering their practices on physical files, and insisting we maintain files dating back decades, even as the world heads unalterably in a paperless direction."

These are the same attorneys, of course, who once decreed computers were for secretaries only and later that fax rooms were forever.

Expectations always surround the party's main event: the choice of entertainment, aka career-endangering opportunities to skewer the equity partners.

Like a child's birthday party, some years we hire a "professional" (read: partner's brother-in-law) magician-chef-comedian to douse our rainmakers. This year, we offer game shows, heavy on inside jokes, a few of which even slipped past the fun-suckers, er, rather, HR professionals.

The firm's fattest cats seemed to take their digs well, but alas, their standard, Cheshire-grinned rejoinder rings true: Bonus checks won't get cut till next week.

Holiday parties once featured dancing, and somewhere, somehow, a few might still. The sentimental part of me is tempted to send my resume to any such firms sight unseen, but it's hard to imagine many HR officers, or any sober member of society, would today encourage lawyers to dance.

Many law firms decided to forgo holiday parties, announcing they would make charitable contributions instead. It is widely understood their demise was actually caused by the hazards of holiday dancing.

Soon after the bar closes, talk of the post-party spreads and the place starts to empty out. Another holiday party is in the books, yet minefields persist. Departing attorneys must decide who gets a hug and who merely a wave or nod.

Those over a certain age are regarded as safe to hug; so too those of the same sex. As for everybody else? Unsure what HR recommends, I usually avoid making this call with an inconspicuous early exit.

This year, however, I must stay to settle the firm bill and, thus, find myself giving and receiving too many uncertain hugs. Turning to my friends from HR for some advice, I discover most have inconspicuously exited early.

The only one left? The Director. Approaching, I begin: "Happy holidays, Larry."



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