

Oh No! The Office Holiday Party is a Seated Dinner!

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By Susan Dunn

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Q: What's harder than knowing how to shine at the Christmas office party?

A: Knowing how to shine when it's a seated dinner.

The open-format Christmas office party is a piece of cake compared to a seated lunch or dinner. At a buffet-type function you can move around, which means you can disappear when you want to. You don't want to get caught hiding out in the ladies' room all night, but since you're free to move around, you can leave any person or group when you want, and even leave the room.

However, at the seated affair you are trapped. If it strikes fear in your heart, you aren't alone. Even for a pro, this isn't easy. Here are some tips:

IT ISN'T A PARTY

Never forget this. It may superficially appear different (new place, new people), but remember everything you say can and will be used against you.

You'll be seeing these people Monday morning. If you think it's hard to face a one-night stand after creeping out of her house in the middle of the night, wait till you have to face your boss Monday morning after getting sloppy drunk Saturday night and spilling your guts about some personal problem you can't handle. I mean how will (s)he expect you to be a competent Marketing Director when you were crying because your cat had died? I know the two things have nothing to do with one another, but your boss doesn't.

Think of the word "mortifying." No one needs to know about your hysterectomy, how well Viagra works for you, that your young wife left you, that you think the new manager stinks, or anything else about your personal life.

You simply are not free to say anything you want to.

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FOLLOW THE LEADER

Once seated, you must watch the leader to know what to do. It can be the boss, or his or her spouse, whichever one is dominant. Watch what they're doing. Emily Post may say not to eat asparagus with your fingers, but if your boss' wife is, you really need to think about it. In most cases, I'd go ahead and do it along with her. If you don't, you're making a statement. It's that important what your boss and his or her partner do. Don't start to eat until they do. If they don't order dessert, you don't. Monkey see, monkey do.

CONVERSATION

General conversation while you're being seated will devolve into one conversation dominated by the

boss at least for a while, often for the entire meal. Your job is to pay attention. If the boss, sometimes aided and abetted by a crony or colleague, starts in on a monologue, be an attentive audience. Look horrified if something bad happened, laugh if he tells a joke, maintain eye contact, be respectful. It can amount to a performance. It's almost always dominated by males.

FOOLS RUSH IN

There may be lulls in this monologue from the boss. Don't attempt to fill them if you're an amateur. Nowhere does the expression "fools rush in where angels fear to tread" apply more fully.

You don't know this side of your boss. You don't know her sense of humor, what annoys her, what her prejudices are, her religion, or any number of important things that you can step right into if you feel compelled to fill air time. Even the most innocent comment can get you in trouble because it's a very magnified situation – one person talking at a time to the whole table. What you say will echo and reverberate, all the way to your next performance appraisal.

ETIQUETTE

Timing matters. No choice here. Arrive 15 minutes early and don't leave before everyone leaves.

Don't be the first to complain about anything. No matter how it appears to you, the company (boss) is putting on the affair, and criticisms will be taken personally. Don't send the meat back; don't complain about how hard the chairs are. You're a guest; be appreciative. Save face.

If the boss does complain about something, agree, but be milder about it. Never upstage. If he thinks the salmon is "atrocious," don't say, "I thought it was heavenly," or talk about a time when you got instantly ill with food poisoning over salmon one time. If he's got a big personality, he'll probably announce the salmon won't do and tell the waiter to take back everyone's. If it's more minor than that, say something like, "Yes, I think you're right, but isn't the risotto delicious?"

Conversation is the focus. Comments should never be made about what someone else is eating or

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isn't ("What's wrong Marcia? Don't you like the XX?") or doing. If someone knocks over their water glass, help them out surreptitiously, but keep the conversation going as if nothing had happened.

CROSS TALK

If the boss starts a conversation with the person on her side, you may do the same, but be prepared to cease if the boss takes the stage again.

Many people find this practice obnoxious, but the boss is "the presence," and it's their job to hold court. It's work and it's expected. Save any personal issues you may have about this for another time.

FISH BOWL

All of us know intuitively that the person who isn't nice to the waiter isn't a nice person at all. You are being watched.

BLEND

Match behaviors. Sedate, or rowdy, attempt to get with the spirit of the thing. Whatever personal idiosyncrasies you may have about food or spirits, keep it to yourself. No one wants to know that you're on a diet, lactose intolerant, in recovery, allergic to chocolate, or a vegan. Order or eat from what's available, without comment.

METALLIC?

What to wear? Office festive, which means a muted Christmas pin, scarf or tie, but don't be shouting "Christmas." Stay within the normal range for attire at your office adding only a 'nod' to the holidays. If you don't know the difference between "professional dress up" and "party attire," you're going to flunk. This is not a time for skins, latex, cleavage, a lot of hairy chest exposed, a jingle bell bracelet, or anything remotely approaching a "costume."

You may feel like Mrs. Santa or the Christmas Elf that night, but Monday morning you're going to be HR Director or Senior Accountant, and how can they respect you when they were staring at your exposed breasts across the table?

DON'T ENJOY YOURSELF

Sorry, it's one of the most stressful things you can go through. You are trapped for an hour or more of scrutiny, you have to think every moment, and you must've relax.

If you're new to this, observe others to know what to do, imitate the person you think is most savvy, and resist all urges to stand out in any way. There's nothing wrong with sitting there, smiling, and saying a little when spoken to. Observe with the intent of learning. Notice what goes over well and what doesn't, and make mental notes for the next time.

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Catering For Your Party

By George Meszaros

Dealing with catering service providers is part of planning a successful party. A caterer normally provides food and beverages and they have an important role in your party. If you have experience with caterers, you are in luck. But if you have never hired a caterer before, don't worry.

If the party venue offers this service, it is also possible that you don't need to worry about hiring a third party caterer. Even if catering is not provided by the party location, they may be able to recommend some to you. If your party site manager, recommends a caterer you should still do your homework. Just like any other vendor, a caterer should be able to provide you with several references. You should always contact the references.

You should ask about reliability, trustworthiness, quality, and related issues. Never assume that a caterer recommended by someone is surely the best possible solution for your event. One caterer may work great for one event, but be insufficient for others. A caterer may be experienced in smaller parties, but not experienced with parties with two hundred invited guests.

There are two different styles of catering: Seated Dinner – Seated dinner setting will normally require more staff than a buffet. Serving the food requires more servers. With a seated dinner, you will need more tables and chairs because most of the guests will eat at the same time. A seated dinner offers less flexibility for your guests, because they usually have a couple of options to choose from. To simplify the process, menu options should be included with the party invitations so your guests can choose which selection they prefer. The pre-selection process enables you to work with your caterer on the final count.

Buffet - You may be able to get away with less chairs and tables with a buffet dinner. Buffet gives your party guests more flexibility, and they don't all have to eat at the same time. A buffet dinner also gives your party guests more options to customize their food selection. The buffet requires fewer servers and less staff. Guests can pick and choose what they like. In addition to the obvious advantage of a more flexible dinner, your guest can go back for seconds. Because buffet dinners require minimal service staff, you may even be able to save money with this option.

George Meszaros with

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