

Don't let your staff Christmas party turn into a work related incident.

Successful Christmas parties have been known to help build staff moral and provide an opportunity to thank our staff for their efforts and accomplishments for the year in a relaxed and enjoyable environment. Unfortunately Christmas parties do have the tendency to host, instigate or aggravate staff issues and can result in alcohol related injuries and misconduct.

Under the current OHS and EEO legislation, functions such as Christmas parties regardless of where they are held are still classed as a work function. Therefore employers need to be aware that their OHS and EEO obligations are the same as if they were back in the workplace.

Any incidents that occur during and sometimes after the function can be the employers' responsibility and can result in the employer being liable for claims relating to; sexual harassment, discrimination, workplace bullying and harassment and workers compensation claims.

To help our readers we have some tips and advice to consider when planning your staff Christmas party that will assist in reducing the probability of the above issues occurring.

PLANNING
Attendees Consider inviting partners or having a family day, this will help control any excessive drinking and we are generally better behaved when our family is around. It is also likely that more people will attend as they will not have to arrange child care. Consider making it invite only, this will reduce the temptation of people assuming they are invited and gate crashing i.e. those no longer employed or sub-contractors.
Venue Consider your venue carefully; avoid holding it at the office. Think of a venue that creates an atmosphere you will all be comfortable in, this could be the park, local restaurant or club.
Timing Consider the time of day you hold the function, lunch time is often better than evening and be strict on start and finish times, ensuring times are stated on the invitations.
Food Provide some type of food either a meal or finger food such as tapas. This will help relax people but also help slow down the alcohol consumption. Alcohol I'm not aware of any rule that says we have to serve alcohol at a staff Christmas party, it is just expected. If you do plan to have an alcohol free party ensure people are aware of it prior to the event.

Alternatively if you are serving alcohol, consider either restricting the amount of drinks or the strength of drinks available and always have alternatives to alcohol available such as soft drink and water.
EEO Try not to discriminate against those with food allergies, who don't drink alcohol or who don't celebrate Christmas. I know of some organisations that now call their Christmas party an "End of Year Party" to ensure all employees feel welcome to attend regardless of their religious preference. Consider providing transport, cab vouchers or use a venue that has complementary transport to ensure employees get home safely.
PRIOR Revisit Policies

A few days prior to the Christmas party revisit policies such as drugs and alcohol, code of conduct and harassment with all staff, reminding them that these are to be complied to at all work functions including the Christmas party.

Make it clear that misconduct at the Christmas party could result in disciplinary action, including demotion or dismissal. And that if an employee is asked to leave by the employer due to intoxication, the employee must leave. Some organisations also include this information on the invitations.

Resolve Known Issues Where possible resolve any known staff issues prior to the party as these could end up unsightly once alcohol is added to the mix.
DURING Ensure alcohol is being served responsibly and that underage staff are not served alcohol, managers should set an example by behaving and drinking responsibly. Additionally it is always good to have at least one person remain sober to supervise.

WHAT IF AN INCIDENT OCCURS If an incident does occur or claims of misconduct behavior are reported, it is important that you request for anyone who may be involved to leave (if appropriate). It is important to follow your usual investigation and disciplinary process thoroughly before action is taken. However avoid trying to discipline anyone or investigate the problem at the party, deal with the incident when everyone is sober and back at the workplace.

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