

## How to Avoid Awkwardness at a Corporate Holiday Party

By Jennifer Selby Long

Despite the weak economy, or perhaps because of it, there seem to be quite a few parties this year.

As a leader and representative of management for your company, it's important to strike a tone that is festive without appearing to lose sight of the larger context that we are very early in the recovery and it's been a tough year for many employees.

Remember that all eyes are on you, even in non-office settings – perhaps even more so in non-office settings where your behavior will be seen as “the real you.”

Corporate holiday parties and their sibling, the corporate-sponsored charity event, remain one of the weirdest hybrids of work and play that I have ever experienced. They're a veritable minefield in which if you perform well, absolutely no one will remember you, and if you perform poorly, *everyone* will remember you for years to come -- for all the wrong reasons.

In the spirit of ensuring the former and not the later, I offer this simple advice to avoid awkwardness and create a pleasant atmosphere, without excess effort.

Nobody *really* cares what you do for a living or what projects you're working on. Yet, in American culture, like work-a-holic lemmings we instinctively ask, “What do you do?” *This is a particularly sensitive subject this year as many employees and spouses at the event may be part of the 10% of unemployed Americans -- and the numbers aren't much better in many other countries, either.* Resist the urge to open with the familiar, “So what do you do?”

Become the greatest conversationalist they've ever met in their entire lives by *not* asking about work. Try, “What interests you outside of work?”, “What are you doing these days for fun?”, “What are your kids up to?”, or anything else that invites conversation on a subject of interest other than work.

Follow-up questions help, too. (“You do scrapbooking with your friends. I didn't realize that was a group hobby. How did you become interested in it?” “So your teenagers are budding Emo-Punk t-shirt designers. Wow. I've never heard of that. Tell me more.”)

Don't bolt from conversations with lower-ranking employees the minute you see a prospect, C-suite executive, or other prestigious individual. With few exceptions, you'll not only be laughed at by the people you abandon, but you'll be laughed at by the VIP's, too. A holiday party is not the place to corner them with your great idea or product. Say hello, engage in brief conversation, offer to introduce them to others, and move on.

*Introduce yourself to every person at your table*, and talk with each of them at some point during dinner, including the spouses, who will speak highly of you forever simply because you steered the conversation away from endless droning on about the office.

Bonus points if you remember names and introduce people to each other. Here's a great trick for remembering names. Kirk and I swear by it, and we both do much better with names now that we're using this trick. As soon as you are introduced, say the individual's name, as in, "Pleased to meet you, Kate." Then use it two more times early in the conversation. The repetition makes it stick in your head.

*And Now for my Favorite Tip for a Sit-Down Dinner*

When you sit down next to the CEO, avoid eating his or her food by remembering that your bread plate is to the left and your drink is to the right. Cue yourself by forming an "o" with your index finger and thumb. On the left hand, this forms the letter "b" for bread, and on the right hand, the letter "d" for drink.

Try it now. See? Nifty, huh?

Don't worry about getting caught doing this. It's a sure-fire conversation starter. For example, the person next you just might say, "Ah, I see you read *Traveling Light*, too..."