

Welcome to the thirtieth edition of Jennifer Selby Long's *Traveling Light*. Are you blessed with the talent and opportunity to lead? *Traveling Light* will skyrocket your impact and lighten the load in your life. It's based on the work of executive coach and management consultant Jennifer Selby Long. Copyright 2008 Jennifer Selby Long. All rights reserved.

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## **How to Excel at the Ultimate Oxymoron: a Recession-Era Corporate Holiday Party**

This week we're taking a break from the heavy-duty columns I've written the past three months to prepare for the upcoming holiday season and that most complex event: the corporate holiday party that coincides with an economic meltdown.

Despite the weak economy, or perhaps because of it, most companies in the U.S. plan to carry on with their holiday parties. As a leader in attendance at this event, it's important to strike a tone that is festive without appearing to lose sight of the larger context. 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.”

Last year I ran a popular column explaining how to make your attendance at this event a pleasure and a success. I am running it again -- updated it to reflect the current economic situation in which you are leading your organization.

Corporate holiday parties 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 these tips.

### *How to Get in the Right State of Mind*

As a leader, if you're stressed and fearful, your feelings will leak out no matter how hard to try to appear confident. The more you feel freaked out, the more people around you will feel freaked out, no matter how hard to try to hide it, so you've got to go to the source.

Do the exercises from the October 14, 2008 issue of *Traveling Light* (<http://www.selbygroup.com/news.html>) whenever you feel fearful. Focus your attention on the vision for the company, on positive steps the leadership team is taking to lead the organization through the recession.

I sat in on a senior staff meeting held by one of my clients earlier this week and he was absolutely inspiring. He told his team, “We have to plan for the worst, but we also have to plan for the success that will follow this downturn -- because when it comes back, we will see absolutely enormous demand.” While acknowledging a rough current situation, he was also reassuring his team that he saw a bright future for the company.

Now, I'm not suggesting that you discuss the prospect of lay-offs or plant closures at the holiday party! However, do keep your mindset positive in the coming weeks so that whenever you are surrounded by employees, that positive energy rubs off on them and your upbeat attitude is authentic.

### *How to Choose Your Attire: This Year, It's Easy*

This year, even if you are doing well, it's a good idea to dial down the bling a notch or two.

- Leave the gold Rolex at home. You don't have to wear a Swatch, but please be cautious about flashing a \$30,000 timepiece to people who are worried about getting laid off, paying their bills, and other basic needs.
- For the female executives, this is an easier year for corporate party attire than last year, since a more classic, subdued look is appropriate to the economic climate, as well as to your role as an executive. Choose from the many options out there, or go full-on recession-chic by wearing something already in your closet.
- I always greatly admire a woman with the guts and style to wear an elegant tuxedo to a corporate event, but only try this if you have great style and the confidence to pull it off without showing off. Corporate parties are about reinforcing teamwork, not about individual stars outshining the rest of the pack.
- There's no need to be downright drab. It's a party after all. Wear a little bling if it's your style. Just don't take it as far as you might in boom times.

All bets are off if you work in the entertainment industry. If that's the case, take everything I've written and ignore it.

### *And Now, for the Part You Really Don't Want Me to Tell You...*

Yes, I am probably out of my mind to share this picture. No doubt I will take a good ribbing for it. That's yours truly with her team mates, many years ago, at my first Nestle Beverage Company holiday party. Ironically, we were actually keeping an eye on our alcohol consumption, since our department reported up to HR and we were supposed to be at least half-decent role models.

If you're as outgoing as I am when stone cold sober, just imagine how goofy you must look after a few drinks. A general guideline – you can probably handle about half as much as you think!

Particularly limit yourself to one or two drinks during cocktails, since there's more to come with dinner.

This tip applies even if your superiors are stone-cold blottoed. That promotion or transfer you may want will in part be based on your good judgment in a variety of settings. No, it's not fair, is it?

### *How to be a Great Conversationalist – a Pain-Free Approach*

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 recently laid off or anticipating the ax coming down soon.* Don't let party conversations turn glum by opening with shop talk. Make this party a chance for people to forget about their problems for an evening.

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.")

*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. My husband swears by it. 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 great conversation starter. For example, the person next you just might say, "Ah, I see you read *Traveling Light*..."

## **News**

I had an amazing time at the Online Success Blueprint Workshop last week in Los Angeles. I learned so much in four days that I had to take a day off for brain recovery. I'm incorporating what I learned in my business right away and through 2009.

The OSBW is the brainchild of Alexandria Brown, an enormously successful businesswoman and lovely person all-around. Here we are at the launch party for her new magazine, *Ali*.

I'll repeat what I said in the last issue because it's so important: *professional development is essential, now more than ever.* Please don't deny this to yourself. If you can't swing the same investment in professional development that you had last year,

focus your development and get creative to make sure you keep growing. If your employer doesn't fund it, fund it yourself.

Every time I invest in my professional development, I can offer more to my clients, and my business grows. This has been true regardless of economic conditions. It's a win for everyone. I do not believe that a person can plateau for very long before you start to sink. It's essential to keep challenging yourself, learning, and growing.

Speaking of learning and growing, here's a great travel tip that I learned from my friend and colleague, world traveler Julie Brown. I had so many materials and notes from the workshop and I didn't want to take any chance of losing them, so I packed them in my carry-on suitcase and shipped my clothes back.

I admit I felt a little goofy signing for a box full of laundry at my office, but it was worth it! I traveled with only my carry-on luggage, I was in no rush to have these particular clothes at home anyway, and I could get right to work with my new materials on my first day back in the office.

Happy Thanksgiving to everyone in the U.S.! I am truly grateful for the abundant blessings in my life and I wish you great abundance in your life, too.

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