

# You're Canceling Your Holiday Party Because Matt Lauer Was Fired? You Have a Bigger Problem

Dear Stephen:

*I own a medium-size business, and every year we hold several holiday parties. We host one big bash at our headquarters and others at each of our regional offices. This year, I am worried things may have to change.*

*It is no secret an office party is the perfect storm for sexual harassment issues. Bringing alcohol into the workplace can, in my experience, be a lot of fun and a great way to build camaradery between employees, but sometimes it can backfire when people lose control of their less savory impulses.*

*Today, it seems every time I turn around another high profile sexual harassment issue is happening in the news. The sad truth is all these big shots on TV are only a reflection of what is happening on the factory floor and in the secretarial pool. From the drafting board to the board room, sexual assault and harassment is an issue in every workplace. I have two daughters myself and am all too glad we are finally waking up to these*

*issues. However, I am ashamed to say I have seen my own company's parties (from as far back as when I was allowed to call them "Christmas parties") turn into situations where people are uncomfortable. From assistants who have too much to drink, to cocky salespeople who think they own the world, everybody has the capability to step over the line.*

*With all of the world watching for sexual harassment today, I am starting to feel like I need to protect myself and my business by just canceling the holiday parties. Why do I need the exposure? Is this as much of a risk as I imagine it to be? What do you think, and have you heard these concerns from anyone else?*

**Dan the No-Party Man**

Dear No-Party Man,

Even before I get to your question, I should say I think your letter says a lot about your company's culture. I am sure you



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: [StephenSays@bellow.press](mailto:StephenSays@bellow.press).

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @WorkplaceGuru, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

may not even realize the picture you just painted, but let's just say I am glad I don't work for you. Did you really complain you can no longer call them Christmas parties? Do you really still have a "secretarial pool"? Did I step into an episode of "Mad Men"?

If what you say is true and every time your employees get near a drop of alcohol they pounce on the closest co-worker, I think you have far larger issues than whether or not to cancel the holiday party. Even the sentiment a holiday party is somehow a place where you or your employees are exposed to claims of sexual harassment seem to belie any understanding of how serious

this issue is. You seem to think this is an eventuality you need to manage, as if these issues will only come up if there is some enormous incident.

Alcohol is not, and never will be, an excuse for inappropriate behavior, no matter what the situation may be. What does this mean for you on a day-to-day basis? No sales meetings? No client lunches or dinners? If you are concerned about your workers at the holiday party, shouldn't you be concerned for workers when one of your "cocky salesmen" comes back from lunch with a client after sipping a couple of cocktails? But I don't think you're as concerned about your employees as you pretend to be. I think you're just worried about having to deal with the mess.

I have heard some version of your question from other employers, and some companies have already made the decision to cancel their holiday parties. A study by Challenger, Gray, & Christmas (a polling firm out of Chicago) found a 4 percent decrease in offices across the country having a holiday party. Only 49 percent of the offices that opt to put on some sort of shindig will be serving alcohol, down from 62 percent last year.

My response to these questions is always the same. Who are you people, and who have you been hiring to work for you? Sexual harassment becomes the head-

line of the day, and you suddenly make a corporate decision your employees are not mature or smart enough to behave correctly at a company sponsored event?

Here is my advice: Bad behavior, especially sexual harassment, in the workplace has to stop. The best way to do this is prove you, as the business owner, CEO, president or even a sales manager, take this issue seriously and won't tolerate bad behavior.

This is not an HR issue. Removing this sort of insidious and despicable conduct requires a thoughtful cultural overhaul that at a company's highest levels permeates into every sector of your operation. It is not a generational thing, either. I know large companies in Silicon Valley staffed with hundreds of 24-year-old kids facing these same issues. Either your employees behave badly, or they do not. Male or female, gay or straight, it simply doesn't matter. Some people do bad things and they need to be punished accordingly.

Do not fall into the trap of blaming these issues on a drink or a party atmosphere, and don't blame it on the nature of your business. Sexual harassment exists everywhere — in tech, medicine, politics and, of course, TV and media. It is rampant, and canceling your holiday party isn't going to do anything to change that. It might protect you from a headache in the short term, but

if you have someone who would act this way at a party, chances are you'll eventually have to deal with them acting this way in some other setting.

I look at some corporate cultures today, and they make me sick. Every company big or small should have a code of ethics your employees sign off on as soon as they accept a job. The bottom line is there is no room for any sort of overtly sexual behavior in the workplace. If you think the workplace is the place for you to prey on your co-workers or subordinates, then you should be fired. There are no exceptions.

Let me also say I understand people can meet romantically at work. I have seen it happen many, many times. However, anyone considering individual cases in good faith cannot confuse sexual harassment with a real relationship. Here's the giveaway: The victim usually tells you if it was a consensual relationship.

The bottom line is if you are so concerned a company holiday party is going to morph into a drunken hotbed of assault and harassment, you have a lot more to worry about than simply canceling a little celebration. Look at the root of the cause, and fix it. The times are clearly changing, and your company better change with them.

**Stephen**