

The Workers' Party

Looking at the Positive Side of Office Celebrations

By Marcela Kogan
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Office parties are supposed to be fun. They are meant to boost morale, enhance team-building and give people a chance to schmooze, bond with the staff. But instead of sharing a laugh with a colleague and toasting the organization's future, many people stand around at work-related celebrations grumbling, checking watches and wishing they were elsewhere.

Often, says Joseph Mancuci, president of the Center for Organizational Excellence in Alexandria, there is nothing to cheer about, what with cutbacks, frozen salaries and layoffs. These conditions contribute to the dying spirit of even the most committed workers.

"Many employees today don't feel a sense of loyalty and teamwork," says Mancuci. "Forty years ago you could expect to have one or two jobs in a lifetime. Now, many have seven or eight. There is no time to emotionally bond with others. . . . When one person has a birthday, it's seen as one more weary event rather than an opportunity to celebrate the wondrous nature of human interaction."

But even people who enjoy their jobs often dread going to social affairs with colleagues. Take your typical Washington birthday party. The staff sneaks into the conference room while the person being honored is buzzed in, presumably for a meeting. Everyone clusters around the food. As the person approaches the door, staffers raise their fingers to their lips, hushing the crowd. A few chuckle anyway, spoiling the fun for others. And then . . . *surprise* . . . the person is given a card, which was previously passed around—concealed in a manila folder—for everyone to sign.

Anne Rogers, former manager of a Washington association, used to attend about 12 birthday parties a year. "It seems there were so many more," says Rogers, who could never think of anything clever to scribble in the card, knowing that 12 other people were reading it. "Everyone stood around and said stupid things like 'Wow,

that's a chocolate cake.' Somebody might think of asking the person if they are doing anything for their birthday. Then there is a pause. Somebody finally says, 'Well, did you get the memo to Fred?'"

Even organizations that care about their employees often pass up the chance to motivate staff and instill organizational pride. According to Terrence Deal, professor of human and organizational development at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, organizations have forgotten the importance of celebrations. They've forgotten that meaningful rituals can touch people, reinforce the culture of the organization and its appreciation of people. Birthday parties, for instance, are perfect occasions to highlight the person's contribution to the organization.

"At a birthday party," says Deal, "why not tell about the person's history in the company. At other social functions, tell stories about the organization, the founder. When I suggested that stories be told, one client said to me, 'God, I don't want to do that. I'm not sure anyone wants to listen.' When he told a story, I watched the younger people. It was amazing; they were fascinated. A couple of corporations now have annual story-telling sessions. It's part of their annual ceremony. There is a competition for the best story. It's powerful stuff!"

Organizations also can use social rituals to celebrate heroes or heroines—people who exemplify the organization's values. Deal gives the example of a Mary Kay Cosmetics event, in which the top salesperson's award was given to a woman with a fatal illness. "If a woman who is dying of cancer," says Deal, "can get the top award, what does that say to people? It says the value of working for Mary Kay Cosmetics is the 'you can do it' spirit. You saw 5,000 people with tears in their eyes."

Nothing that powerful has ever happened at any office function that Alice Sudduth, a District resident who works for the government, ever has attended. But, unlike many of her colleagues, she likes the light-hearted atmosphere of work-related celebrations. "I love office rituals," says Sudduth. "You get to talk to people that you



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don't see very often and you get to take a break from work.

"One of my things," Sudduth adds, "is to arrive at parties early and get into the spirit. But a lot of people are sticks-in-the-mud. I feel like saying to them, 'If you don't want to participate in the party thing, fine. But don't stomp around and make everybody feel guilty because they are there. Sit in your office and close the door.'"

Frequently, Sudduth strolls through the corridors of her agency, peeking in on other peoples' celebrations. "Someone will often say, 'Hey, come and get some food.' So I go in there, fill up my plate and then say, 'By the way, whose birthday is this?' Then I go back to my office and eat." But Sudduth's attitude about work-related functions is an exception. Most people dread having to socialize with work-mates they don't know well—or worse—that they dislike.

Yet, despite how dull or trivial many office rituals appear to be, most organizations continue to hold them. Deal explains that office rituals—which also include staff meetings, conferences

and other activities vital to bonding people—are important more for what they represent than for what they produce. Performance appraisals, he says, rarely yield useful information about how well employees are doing, yet most organizations persist in conducting them every year.

Likewise, management training programs often produce little visible improvement in management skills, he says, but they socialize participants in the management culture. "The persistence of processes that never accomplish what they are suppose to," says Deal, "is one indication of the need for ritual and ceremony in organizations. They provide order and meaning that helps bind an organization together."

Part of the problem with office celebrations, experts say, is that people don't come up with anything fun to do, so they keep throwing the same boring parties over and over again. but office rituals don't need to be confined to traditional activities.

Marion McGrath, owner of a print and publishing company in the District, enhances team-

building through humor. New employees get indoctrinated through "hazing." Take the latest victim: Every morning, the new employee's desk got pushed back several inches toward the wall. He didn't realize it was a prank for nearly a week. By the end of the week, he could barely get into his chair.

"Anytime you use humor," says McGrath, "you single people out as someone special deserving attention. People bask in that, that someone cared enough to take the time. . . . It makes people feel they are part of the in-crowd. Rituals we do here seem to bring people together because they laugh. That does more for morale and comraderie than any party. To work here, you have to have fun."

Ensuring employees have fun on the job has become another measure of a manager's success. According to Mancuci, some corporations have value statements that require managers to show that their employees have had fun under their rein. "What I've seen is a creative use of employees getting together to develop a sense of teamwork and play."

For example, one business held a beach party in the office to celebrate a project's completion. Employees placed a bet with the boss that if they finished the project on time they could have a summer beach party at work and that the boss—a portly, conservative man—had to wear a bathing suit.

The skeptical boss was shocked when the project was done. He stood by his door watching employees bring in rock-and-roll music, beach umbrellas, coolers with soft drinks, watermelon, fried chicken and a baby pool filled with water. Women put on bathing suits; men wore cutoffs.

"The boss wore shorts and a T-shirt," says Mancuci. "But the staff said, 'It won't do.' They went out and bought him a bathing suit. Every woman had a picture taken with the boss standing in the sand at the beach party. That happened three years ago, and the people are still talking about it."

Having a beach party may seem too far-fetched for the conservative mind-set of many Washington managers. But putting some feeling behind office functions could make a difference in staff interaction. Breaking out of the conventional mold has worked for McGrath. "People here would work until they drop," she says. "We have a wonderful staff and the humor doesn't contribute to a goof-off environment at all. I'm convinced that is because we have a familial environment and we are meeting some of their (employees') emotional needs."