

Fallout After the Office Holiday Party



Leading up to the workplace office party, you made an extra effort to remind all employees that company rules and policies would remain in effect during company activities. However, once the tinsel had fallen and the decorations put away, it turns out that not all employees maintained the necessary decorum during holiday parties. Now you have to determine what course of action to pursue to resolve problems that arose at the office holiday party.

You Can Discipline Workers for Party Behaviours

In a 2012 survey of workers in the UK, 1 in 10 workers reported facing disciplinary action as a result of a holiday party. In Canada, many cases have been brought to the courts that upheld the rights of an employer to discipline an employee for behaviour conducted at an off-site, off hours workplace holiday party. In other cases, employers were held liable for an employee's injury sustained during a workplace holiday party.

Can you discipline and fire an employee for behaviours exhibited away from the office and outside workplace hours? The answer is yes. If you do have behavioural policies in place and do inform employees of these policies, you can apply workplace discipline to any workplace event.

The Difference the Party Makes

Despite warnings people act and feel different when attending workplace parties especially when these parties are hosted off site, off hours and involve alcohol, music, dancing and fun. According to research the HR Insider cited in a recent article 'Office parties can get you drunk on less alcohol' the environment you create at a holiday party can contribute to your workers losing some of their inhibitions.

The subjective truth is that while workplace rules do apply to Saturday night party at a hotel, or even at a home, some rules kind of don't apply. This causes confusion. Which rules don't apply? During the normal workday you would not encourage employees to dance, celebrate, come and go when they choose, drink alcohol, smoke, and snuggle up to their spouses, yet these activities are expected at a party. This is one reason you need to be clear about your expectations.

Context changes things. At the holiday party, if an employee said something rude to a supervisor after a few drinks, is that really the same as insubordination at work? It can be difficult to assess where the line is crossed but when you apply discipline,

consistency is important.

Consistently Is Important

Factors in Determining Discipline:

1. **Context.** The context of an infraction can play a role in the disciplining process. A violation committed in front of the public may have more consequences compared to one in a private setting. For example, if an employee talks smack about a co-worker in a private conversation this would have different consequences than the same employee making such comments in front of a customer.
2. **Employees past record.** Consider patterns of previous behaviours. An employee who has a history of making inappropriate comments may experience more severe consequences compared to one who has no history of past disciplinary problems. If you have a progressive disciplinary process, this differentiation should be built into the process.
3. **Employee role.** Some roles, for example supervisors and management, must be held more accountable for their infractions. For example, a supervisor who breached confidentiality may need more discipline imposed compared to junior employees.
4. **Similar Settings:** Consistency is important, but consistency does not mean one discipline process fits every infraction. Look at similar cases and compare them to one another. Refer to how discipline was applied in the past as a guide to your discipline after the holiday party.

Cut Employees Slack

Can you cut your employees slack? You can always cut employees some slack if the investigation, policies and procedures allow you to, and if you apply consistent slack to all employees. Clearly cite and follow your existing progressive disciplinary procedures as you forge ahead. For information on applying progressive discipline, refer to our piece, *The 4 Steps to Progressive Discipline*.

If you believe an employee's behaviour was a one-time breach brought on by the party, then build this into the progressive discipline imposed upon them. Give this employee the opportunity to correct his or her behaviour or apologize. You do not need to wait until next December to see if it will happen again. If, in the next 6 months, the behaviour has not been repeated at similar events, you may choose to remove the discipline note from his file.

The bottom line is that if an employee engaged in behaviour at a party that would get him fired at work, you need to be consistent in your follow-up activities.