

# The Problem with Holiday Staff Parties

By Toni Talbot, SPHR

**Q**uestion: This past December I gave a staff party to celebrate the festive season. I had an open bar. Unfortunately, one of my staff members and her spouse really

took advantage of this open bar and proceeded to get quite intoxicated. There was quite the controversy as to what to do with these two people. We did not want them driving. We ended up taking their keys and calling a cab for them, but the whole incident was embarrassing, complicated, and ruined the evening for most of my staff and me. I don't want to have a "dry" party in the future, since everyone else was able to handle the alcohol, but I don't ever want to go through an incident like this again. What should I do?

**Answer:** As long as the booze flows freely, you may end up with one or two employees who take advantage. You may want to consider closing the open bar for reasons beyond the potential embarrassment you experienced. There could be some potential liability for you and your practice if employees cause harm to others while under the influence from alcohol you have provided.

How you handle this situation begins with what you want from these parties and what you are willing to do. The goal of this party is to improve employee morale and socialization. This means you can make major changes to the party format that are designed to help you control the partygoers' alcohol intake, but still accomplish the goal of the party. For instance, you could:

- schedule the party on a Thursday and start it earlier in the evening;
- limit the time frame the bar will be open;
- limit the amount of drinks that will be provided free, and limit the alcohol provided to beer and wine;
- provide only a cash bar;
- make sure there is plenty of food;
- consider a family party, rather than an adults-only party.

If you choose to continue to provide an open bar, then you should control the ability for employees to

drive home. I know of one company that collects car keys and then provides rides home when needed. This will result in its own set of problems and additional costs, such as how to get the cars left behind back to their rightful owner. Another issue is how to determine if an individual is sober or simply holds alcohol well? I highly doubt that you're going to conduct Breathalyzer tests at the door.

You may want to communicate to your staff in advance that although this is a party, they need to remember it is still business-related, and that the employees and their guests need to act responsibly.

You may need to speak to the employee who drank too much and address the issue with her. If you do, focus on the impact her behavior may have had on her professional reputation. Although this would be an uncomfortable conversation, you could pull it off using a series of pointed questions, such as "You decided to drink quite a bit last night — do you think that was a good idea?" Or: "What did you gain from drinking so much at the party?" "How do you think it affected your professional reputation?" "What do you lose from drinking so much at the party?" "What should you do the next time we have a get-together with alcohol?"

I know just about everyone reading this must think I am a party-pooper. I hate to punish all employees for the behavior of a few, but I also think of the greater liability of letting employees drive after you have provided them with too much booze. The best answer may simply be to not provide the opportunity for employees to drink alcohol, especially for free. ♦

*Toni Talbot is president of Human Resource Management Services. Send questions for publication to Staff Matters, MDA Journal, 230 N. Washington Square, Suite 208, Lansing, MI 48933.*

