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My spouse, the party animal.

Caveat: Obnoxious behaviour by a significant other at office social functions could mean a career hangover

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Linda Allan was attending a financial services firm's annual holiday celebration a couple of weeks ago, when another guest cornered her. She'd never met the man before but within seconds, he was confiding to her about his mother-in-law, the drunk, who had just moved in with him, having been thrown out of her previous living quarters as a result of her alcoholism.

"I'm looking at this person thinking: 'I cannot believe you are sharing this information with me. Talk about inappropriate small talk,' "she recalls. The man's indiscretion may have been spurred, she says, by his own rather hefty alcohol consumption - drink No. 2 during their conversation at the beginning of the party, followed, she noticed, in quick succession by several others.

Ms. Allan wasn't much taken, either, by the ill-fitting suit he wore, nor the fact that he spent much of the evening beside the edibles table, treating it like a food trough. What was this guy doing at the celebration? He was attending as the husband of a woman who worked at the firm. And that employee may be regretting the impression her spouse left behind.

"I didn't really know the woman before [the party], but I thought maybe I'd be able to do business with her. That's why you go to these parties, to get to know people. But after meeting her husband, I thought, 'no way, never,' " says Ms. Allan, a business etiquette expert who attends plenty of such events.

'Tis the season of office holiday celebrations. Everyone has heard those admonitions about how they had better act if they don't want to bring harm to their careers. But while employees are well aware of warnings against getting smashed or dancing on tables themselves, what about their significant other?

"Most employees go to a party and think of it as a fun and exciting time, never being aware that their spouse or partner can get them into trouble," Ms. Allan says. "But it happens all the time."

All too often, employees' other halves jump into the spotlight for transgressions ranging from being overly loud or obnoxious to eating too much, drinking too much, dressing poorly, making sexist or slanderous comments, raising inappropriate subjects or flirting with a colleague's spouse. They can also go to the other extreme, showing overt signs of disinterest or boredom,, and yawning their way through the evening. Either way, the impression they make can be deleterious to the health of their significant other's career.

"The way a spouse behaves at a party is a huge reflection on the employee who brings that person," says Mandy Dinning, an account director at the Calgary office of public relations firm Hill & Knowlton Canada. "If I as a boss see a staff member or spouse act inappropriately at the company Christmas party, I am going to hesitate when I consider

sending that couple to a client's social function because I have seen how they act and I will wonder if their behaviour will hinder our business," Ms. Dinning says.

The price to be paid for a tarnished reputation can range from a tongue-lashing from the boss all the way to a missed promotion. And memories can be long-lasting, and career-stalling.

Nearly 18 years ago, when Ms. Allan was an account manager at a telecom firm, she watched the wife of another employee imbibe too much at an event attended by both clients and sales staff. Eventually, the spouse began chattering loudly and asking probing questions that clearly annoyed other partygoers.

"She forgot where she was and who she was with ... She drank too much, was too forward and too loud, she thought she could behave like she was at a party at her home. She went way off the personality chart to the point she was an embarrassment," Ms. Allan recalls.

Eight years later, she had changed jobs and was manager of a major accounting firm's human resources management consulting practice, when the husband approached her for a job. She refused to grant the man an interview.

"I clearly recalled his wife's behaviour and, to me, it said he was not the kind of person I wanted to have my name associated with. He would be required to go to a lot of functions and I couldn't trust him and his wife to practice the standards I am comfortable with." Ms. Allan says.

While it may seem downright Scrooge-like to have poor party habits follow you like that, companies would rather not risk their corporate reputations, says Ron Burke, a professor specializing in organizational behaviour at York University's Schulich School of Business.

"Standards [in the workplace] are a lot tougher and people's skin is much thinner than 20 years ago when you could do and say pretty much anything and get away with it," Prof. Burke says.

Spousal indiscretions often stem from excessive consumption of alcohol, experts agree. But a spouse who does not understand the workings of a social event, from a company's corporate culture to appropriate topics of conversation, can also make mistakes that will cause their partner considerable grief.

The No. 1 ground rule for significant others at company parties? Keep the spotlight off you and on your spouse. Partners "should show enthusiasm and energy, have a good time and remain positive, but never overtake or outshine the employee," Ms. Allan says.

Ms. Dinning advises employees to sit down with their spouses before the festivities and develop a game plan. Among the strategies: Share with your spouse names and some personal interests of other partygoers so that your other half can initiate small talk that is easygoing and friendly.

Advise what can and cannot be discussed about the company and its employees. A lawsuit it's facing or an imminent firing you're aware of is not good fodder for conversation but the success of the company's latest product line would be.

Spouses should brush up on company issues so they can contribute to conversations when they inevitably turn to shop talk. Grin and bear whenever such talk is out of your realm but come armed with subjects, such as sports, children or even the weather, that will spark fresh discourse. "It is the responsibility of the employee to provide as much comfort for their date and make it as enjoyable as possible, by giving a proper briefing," Ms. Dinning says.

Some companies hire etiquette experts such as Ms. Allan ahead of time to try to stem trouble before it occurs. She will cover topics ranging from how to mingle with guests to acceptable topics of conversation, dress standards and proper manners when eating and drinking.

Her training is usually aimed at employees, who are expected to relay messages to significant others, but occasionally companies will ask both partners to attend her sessions.

Last summer, a major financial institution based in Toronto hired Ms. Allan to deliver tips on spousal manners at the suggestion of one staffer who, while working for another company, witnessed an employee's husband gorge himself at a Christmas party. "The man was loading his plate with shrimp like it was the Last Supper, commenting out loud about how all this expensive food was free and filling his mouth when he should have been concentrating more on the event. The company brought me in to send a signal to the sales group to be aware that standards of etiquette are equally important for their partners," Ms. Allan says.

Companies should also provide reminders to employees about proper decorum when they and their mates attend events on behalf of their employer, Prof. Burke suggests.

That's how advice on business etiquette is doled out at the Markham, Ont., office of accounting firm Grant Thornton LLP, says senior partner Allister Byrne. When employees are hired, they're briefed on the "corporate culture," which includes proper employee and spousal etiquette while representing the company, Mr. Byrne says. And throughout their tenure with the firm, they're regularly reminded that they and their partners are ambassadors for the company while attending social occasions.

"We gently suggest things they should and should not do and, in the end, it is made clear that an employee's partner or spouse is an extension of that employee," Mr. Byrne says. "You and your partner both have a responsibility to act professional in a social setting, even though the wife or husband. does not work for the company."

Mind your manners

If you are joining your significant other at a company function, consider these tips to ensure you stay on your best behaviour:

Know your place. You're a guest, so don't be overly familiar or too forward and never try to be the centre of attention. Think of it as an opportunity to support your partner's efforts in the company, more than a party for you to have a good time.

Learn some background. Ask your partner for details of the event, including its purpose, and names, positions and some interests of fellow attendees to be armed with topics of conversation.

Know the company. Try to be well versed on key company details, such as upcoming projects, so you can carry on an intelligent conversation about your partner's company.

Know the limits. Some topics, usually connected to religion, politics and sex, should be avoided. Also steer clear of sensitive company happenings, such as the firing of a manor or a rumoured merger. Ask your partner for guidance.

Know the dress code. It's usually best to be conservative and understated. Impeccable grooming is a must.

Keep smiling. Don't appear tired and bored to your partner's bosses and colleagues. Your decorum is reflective of your partner's.

Drink and eat in moderation. Alcohol loosens inhibitions and tongues and may cause you to say or do something you will regret. And overloading your plate and stuffing your face shows bad manners.

Know how to handle shop talk. When shoptalk arises, feel free to chip in but steer clear of complicated topics that could demonstrate your lack of knowledge. If excessive shoptalk nudges you out of the conversation, try to initiate new chat on general topics of interest to everyone in a group.

Don't sell yourself. It's okay to bring your business card, but keep card exchanges discreet and hand them out only if people request your contact information.

Say nothing negative. Don't speak negatively about anything or anyone, especially the company or the event.

Keep your private life private. Don't divulge your own or others' private matters. Some stories may be funny but have no place in public, such as the time you drank too much and lost your car in an underground parking lot.

Act in moderation. If the event involves meals and drinks that are put on a tab, show good business compliance by ordering in moderation rather than the most expensive item on the menu.

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