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To give or not to give? That's the office question

Here are some holiday etiquette tips on swapping presents in the workplace

BY DIANE SEWELL

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Karen Mallett has heard plenty of stories over the years about workplace gift-giving gone awry. The one that stands out: One person who presented his colleague with a blow-up doll for Christmas, after the recipient had complained he hadn't had a date in over a year.

Not smart. "Just because you think something is hysterically funny doesn't mean the recipient will," warns Ms. Mallett, the co-founder of Winnipeg-based In Good Company, a business-etiquette consulting firm. "There are some gifts you simply never give in a business setting, ever."

But should you give at all? That's the question that pops up in offices all over the country at this time of year. Then there's what to give and to whom, even what to say in a culturally diverse country.

While there are definitely some hard-and-fast rules when it comes to workplace gift giving, there's a lot of latitude as well.

"First of all, you have to understand your office culture," says human resources trainer Doreen Myers of Stratford, Ont.-based Myers Hamilton & Associates.

"You've got to know the gift-giving practice in your office, especially if you're a new employee. There are a lot of different company practices out there. The point is to know what yours is."

At Stratford Plastic Components Corp., a custom plastic moulder in Stratford, Ont., with 155 employees, everybody gets a best of the season letter signed by all senior managers, plus a turkey or ham, as well as a bonus based on the company's financial performance for the year. They also get a piece of clothing with the company's logo on it.

"They do a lot here for the employees," says HR manager Jackie Powell. "Some companies don't recognize their employees at all this time of the year, so we feel very fortunate."

According to Ms. Mallett, if you're the top boss or the owner of a company, you should be giving something to each and every employee during the holiday season. The same goes for clients: Every one should be contacted and thanked.

Whether the thanks from the boss come in the form of a bonus, a gift or even a card, the key is that it does have to be "sincere," she says.

But such acknowledgments won't change the reputation you've gained throughout the rest of the year, she warns.

"If you've been a horrible boss to work for all year long, it won't matter what you do at Christmas," says Ms. Mallett, one-half of the Etiquette Ladies consulting team.

"But, at the very least, you should be sending every employee a card or greeting -- personally signed."

If you want to show sincerity, avoid sending the message by e-mail, the pros say. "It's better than nothing, but it's not a great choice because it's too easy and everyday," Ms. Mallett warns. Prestamped signatures on cards don't cut it either. "How impersonal is that?"

Given growing diversity, it's also become more advisable to write 'Happy holidays' or 'Season's greetings' rather than 'Merry Christmas' on your cards.

When talking face to face, however, Ms. Mallett says everyone should feel free to follow his or her own custom.

"Just say what you usually say. If you celebrate Christmas, say 'Merry Christmas.' Don't be ashamed of your faith and don't obsess over what to say to people. Just remember it's more about the friendship and the well wishes than it is about getting it right," she says.

While experts agree it's important for bosses to give something to employees during the holiday season, the reverse isn't necessarily true.

"I'm very lukewarm to the idea of giving 'up' to the boss," says Margot Uson, owner of Alternasolutions, a Kirkland, Que.-based human resources and management consulting firm.

"If you work in a small office and have a long-standing relationship with your boss, that may be different, or if everyone in the office chips in to give the boss a gift, that's okay, too, but I wouldn't encourage individuals to rush out and buy for the boss. It isn't really appropriate."

And it won't advance your career either, Ms. Uson says.

"Gift-giving has nothing to do with performance. The best way to be recognized by your boss is by doing your job well -- plain and simple."

It might be worth forgoing a material gift and giving your boss what Ms. Mallett says he or she will really appreciate.

"Sometimes it's enough just to say, 'I want to thank you for such a great year. I feel very fortunate to have learned so much from you. I hope you enjoy the holidays.' You don't have to give more than that."

As for gift giving between co-workers, the practice varies from workplace to workplace, and the rules of etiquette are much less defined, Ms. Mallett says.

"If you're especially close with someone in your department, you may want to exchange gifts, but do it discreetly and away from other co-workers. You should also never give a gift out of obligation. Do it with sincerity because you want to."

Jennifer Travis, an account support manager with the Toronto-based Canadian Management Centre, a not-for-profit business training centre, exchanges gifts with all 12 co-workers in her department. The gifts are small and inexpensive, but meaningful.

"I try to find something that speaks to me about the person I'm buying for," Ms. Travis says.

She enjoys the gift exchange, but also believes the trend is toward less of it in the workplace.

"There's that whole political correctness thing and times are generally a little tighter than they used to be. People don't have a whole lot of money to throw around."

So how much should people spend on a workplace gift?

Ms. Mallet suggests \$15 to \$30 for co-worker-to-co-worker gifts and \$30 to \$150 for the boss's gifts to employees, depending on variables such as the number of staff, how well the company is doing, whether a party is thrown for them, and whether the company is also donating to charity.

For those who do exchange gifts, experts say to keep in mind some strict workplace no-no's. Among them:

Nothing too personal. If it can be found in the bedroom or bathroom, it's inappropriate. Candles are the exception.

No gag gifts. Nothing that explodes or makes rude sounds.

No framed pictures of people being silly at last year's company party.

Nothing of a sexual nature.

Nothing alcoholic. "You never know if the person is a recovering alcoholic or has a faith that prohibits them from drinking," warns Lynda Goldman, a Montreal-based etiquette consultant.

Ms. Myers knows of one manager who gave her female employees silk underwear and had them open them up in front of a mixed office crowd.

So what are acceptable workplace gifts?

It's a question that vexes executive gift buyers: 53 per cent believe their boss is the hardest person to buy a holiday gift for, followed by subordinates (17 per cent), assistants (16 per cent) and colleagues (14 per cent), according to a survey of more than 100 executives by Korn/Ferry International.

According to Ms. Mallett, a box of chocolates, a magazine subscription, a gift certificate, note cards or a lunch out are all suitable.

More costly gifts might include a high-tech item, such as a wireless mouse, or concert tickets, or dinner for two at a nice restaurant.

Don't overspend, however; giving something expensive can appear as if you're trying to curry

somebody's favour, Ms. Goldman warns.

Perhaps a less self-centred move would be to jump on a bandwagon gaining steady popularity in the workplace: giving to charity instead of each other.

Experts say both employers and employees are cutting back on gift giving during the holiday season in favour of donating the money they would have spent instead.

"Giving to those less fortunate and helping other people is a great alternative," Ms. Mallett says. "And isn't that really what the season is supposed to be all about?"

Fretting about holiday gift giving at the office? Here are some tips from experts:

Know the customs of your office, especially if you're new.

Top bosses should give something to every employee, even if it's just a card.

Don't feel you have to buy for the boss. It won't get you ahead and it may be awkward.

If you swap gifts with co-workers, do it discreetly.

Give with sincerity and keep the recipient's taste and interests in mind.

Keep your greetings neutral. Stick to "Happy holidays" or "Season's greetings."

Forget gag gifts or anything too personal.

Be careful about giving alcohol. The person may not drink.

Don't e-mail your greetings. Send a signed, personal card.

Instead of buying gifts, consider making a donation to charity.

Diane Sewell

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