

December 14, 2008

Holiday gift giving at work has pitfalls

Question: Do you have any advice on gift giving at work? Every holiday season I get stressed out because I do not know what is appropriate.

Answer: You are not alone. Gift giving to co-workers can be a daunting and stressful endeavor. It can also be a bit risky and it is important to be thoughtful about it. As with all things image, a little thought and planning go a long way in navigating the gift-giving season.

Gift giving to co-workers has a different set of rules and a line of appropriateness that should not be crossed. What are the rules? Peggy and Peter Post of the Emily Post Institute believe that the two rules of gift giving to work colleagues are to not make the gift too personal or too expensive. Examples of gifts that are too personal are jewelry, perfume and lingerie.

Let's consider four categories of potential recipients during the holiday gift giving season: co-workers, administrative assistants, direct reports and bosses. Who is it appropriate to give gifts to at work, and what to give?

If you are a manager, gift giving is a thoughtful gesture and a nice way to show your appreciation for direct reports, but it is not necessary. If you choose to give gifts, you should gift all direct reports and not be selective.

Your administrative assistant should be on the gift list as a gesture of appreciation for all of the support provided throughout the year. Gifts in the \$25-\$30 range are befitting of most situations.

If the assistant has been working with you for a long period of time, five years or more, a more expensive gift would be thoughtful and appreciated. Take into consideration your assistant's personality and likes to give a personal gift.

As for bosses, a team gift would be well received, especially if the team has a friendly and good working relationship, but it's not necessary. I don't recommend direct reports provide individual gifts to their boss as this gesture might be misinterpreted as trying to gain preferential treatment (also known as sucking up).

When deciding on how much to spend on the gift, it is best to err on the side of caution and give a less expensive but thoughtful gift. Giving expensive gifts to co-workers can seem as though you are playing favorites and has the potential to build resentment with other employees.

I think the best planning is to ask yourself if the gift is thoughtful, tasteful and, most importantly, appropriate. Suggestions for gifts are personalized stationary or gift certificates from restaurants, bookstores, coffee shops and movie theaters. Tickets to sporting events and the theater are always appreciated. Floral arrangements and food can be fun to receive and are always appropriate. Wine and liquor can be appropriate if you know the person enjoys spirits.

A short, handwritten note attached to the gifts will add a personal touch to the experience.

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