

## Holiday Parties Without Headaches: Handling Complaints with Care

December 17, 2025

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The annual holiday party is meant to lift spirits, reward employees, and create a sense of connection as the year draws to a close. It is often one of the few opportunities for your team to relax together outside the workplace. Yet the same relaxed atmosphere can also lead to missteps. When an employee later reports harassment arising from the event, an employer suddenly faces a complex combination of legal obligations, workplace culture concerns, and employee relations challenges.

I regularly help organizations navigate these situations. How you respond in the hours and days after receiving a report matters greatly. With the right approach, you can address the issue responsibly, protect all parties involved, and strengthen trust within your workforce.

### Responding When an Employee Comes Forward

When an employee reports harassment related to a company event, the first and most important step is to acknowledge the complaint and ensure the employee feels heard. Even though the behavior occurred outside the office, the legal analysis does not change when the event is employer-sponsored or reasonably connected to work. Your obligations under federal, state, and local anti-harassment laws still apply.

Begin by gathering the essential facts: what occurred, who was involved, where the incident took place, and whether any witnesses or relevant communications exist. Holiday events often generate photographs, videos, or social-media posts that may become significant pieces of evidence. Preserve anything that may be relevant as early as possible.

Once you have the initial information, move promptly to an impartial investigation. A trained internal investigator or outside counsel can do this. The key is neutrality: no one involved in the investigation should have a personal connection to the individuals involved, and the process should follow the same procedures you would use for any other workplace complaint. While the investigation is ongoing, consider whether temporary steps are necessary to prevent retaliation or further interaction between the individuals involved. These measures need not imply wrongdoing; they are simply safeguards while the facts are being gathered.

At the conclusion of the investigation, determine whether your policies were violated and identify appropriate corrective actions. Communicate the findings to the individuals involved in a way that preserves confidentiality while assuring them that the matter was taken seriously. Finally, check in with the reporting employee afterward to ensure that no subtle form of retaliation has occurred, whether through scheduling changes, exclusion from meetings, or other shifts in workplace dynamics.

### Why Holiday Parties Create Unique Risks

Although holiday gatherings feel informal and festive, the legal standards governing workplace conduct do not disappear at the

door of the venue. When the employer organizes, sponsors, or encourages attendance at an event, it is generally considered an extension of the workplace. Alcohol service, dimmer social boundaries, and a sense of celebration can cloud judgment and create opportunities for conduct that someone later perceives as inappropriate, unwelcome, or intimidating.

Employers also sometimes assume that what happens after official party hours is beyond their responsibility. But if employees continue the celebration in a way that directly follows the company event, the conduct may still be viewed as connected to the workplace. Understanding this continuum is essential when assessing what occurred and how to address it.

A consistent theme in my work with clients is that risk increases when boundaries are unclear: unlimited drinks, a lack of visible leadership presence, or an atmosphere that drifts too far from the professional culture you maintain during the workday. When employees are unsure where the lines are, the potential for misunderstanding increases.

## **Creating a Celebration That Reflects Your Values**

Most employers do not want to cancel holiday events, and they shouldn't. With thoughtful planning, these gatherings can remain enjoyable while aligning with your legal obligations and your organizational culture.

The most effective preparation begins before the party. Communicate expectations clearly but respectfully. A simple reminder that all workplace policies still apply, including those on harassment, professionalism, and retaliation, sets the tone without dampening spirits. Consider the format of the event and whether the venue, timing, and availability of alcohol reflects the environment you want to create. Provide non-alcoholic options, ensure food is available, and, if alcohol is served, rely on trained bartenders rather than self-serve.

Managers play a crucial role. A brief refresher on their responsibilities can make a substantial difference. They set the tone and often serve as the first point of contact if an issue arises. Their visible, engaged presence communicates that the organization values both celebration and safety.

After the event, a short message thanking employees for attending and reminding them that any concerns can be reported without fear of retaliation further reinforces your culture of respect.

## **When a Report Occurs: The Guiding Principles**

If you receive a complaint related to the party, approach it with the same care you would apply to any workplace concern. Ask whether the event was employer-sponsored, what evidence may exist, how quickly the complaint was made, and whether any safety or interim measures are needed. Consistency and fairness are essential. So is prompt action. Delays can undermine credibility and may create legal exposure.

When handled well, the response to a complaint not only addresses the immediate issue but also strengthens the organization's culture. Employees notice when leadership acts thoughtfully and with integrity. That trust is valuable long after the holiday season ends.

A well-planned holiday party can bring your team together in meaningful ways. With clear expectations, attentive leadership, and a willingness to act quickly when concerns arise, employers can enjoy the benefits of these celebrations without creating unnecessary risk.