

Office holiday parties highlight racial dissimilarities and fail to promote team unity

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With the holiday season upon us, companies across the country are excitedly coordinating holiday office parties to celebrate a year's worth of work and provide a social setting that can build stronger bonds among employees. But a Columbia Business School study reveals that these once-thought positive encounters may elicit serious unintended consequences: members of racially diverse groups are not only uncomfortable during the parties, they could feel even more disconnected from their colleagues once the party is over.

The study, titled "Getting Closer at the Company Party: Integration Experiences, Racial Dissimilarity, and Workplace Relationships" and published in the journal *Organization Science* was conducted by Columbia Business School Professor Katherine Phillips, Ohio State University's Professor Tracy Dumas, and The Wharton School's Professor Nancy Rothbard.

"The results are quite ironic," says Professor Phillips. "Managers think these well-intentioned attempts at promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace have a positive effect on employees, yet the feedback we received from our study says these exercises are not helping to bridge interracial gaps. This could be a huge roadblock for companies wanting to leverage their full potential in the competitive global marketplace."

The Research

After reviewing previous research for improving workplace relationships and managing diversity, Phillips and her research partners noted that recommendations often call for encouraging employees to attend social events with co-workers. However, the team pointed out that no research had ever made it clear whether these events lead to improved workplace relationships or not.

To test the assumption that colleagues who attend social events together will feel a closer sense of connection and bonding to each other, the researchers conducted two studies. The first study focused on 228 MBA students and asked them about their previous employment opportunities. The second study involved a nationally representative sample of 141 individuals in the U.S. workforce.

The studies included questions about attendance and behavior about previous company-sponsored events. They also collected information on the participants' demographic characteristics, family structure, and work tenure.

The Results

Both studies concluded that team-building exercises made people feel closer, but only when the co-workers were of similar racial backgrounds. For those of racially dissimilar backgrounds from their colleagues, the study discovered some of the discomfort comes from discussions during these social events that often times highlight differences between the groups. For example, if one group of racially similar colleagues talk about liking rock music, a racially dissimilar colleague might feel excluded because he/she likes gospel music.

To explore why racially dissimilar colleagues are still attending office social gatherings despite feeling uncomfortable, Phillips and her research partners asked respondents, "Why are you motivated to attend company-

related social events?"

The researchers found that racially dissimilar group members felt a sense of obligation and pressure to attend. For example, they felt attending would improve their work status, help them score higher on a performance appraisal, and/or score points with their manager.

"The takeaway here is not that companies should cancel their office holiday party this month. It is to make sure managers who want to foster closer co-worker relationships know that they need to focus less on the party planning and more on creating a culture that accepts, respects, and assimilates differences between colleagues," said Phillips. "Managers should pay special attention to the quality of the employee experience during these office gatherings. Working to understand their employee through this process is the first step to a happier employee, which in turn creates a better company."

Provided by Columbia Business School

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