



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: WORK-RELATED DRINKING

Timely and tricky advice: Serving booze to colleagues (and their teens)

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January 31, 2008

Dear Susan,

I am the head of a family business. We have a holiday get-together when family members who work with us along with senior management are invited to my house. Usually, people bring a bottle, my wife and I make the meal, offer wine and beer, and everyone has a good time. Given the financial mood and considering that teenagers will be present, should I forget about offering alcohol this year?

- Safe or Sorry



Dear Safe,

The short answer is, yes, you should continue the tradition of accepting - and offering - alcoholic beverages.

Drinking moderately is as much a part of socializing as food and music. Making it off limits because teens might be there transforms a normal activity into a tantalizingly forbidden one. Would you trade a little teen tipping in adult company for the bingeing and barfing that is the rule for adolescents who think that drinking's not allowed?

While I wouldn't ban the stuff, you're the boss and it's your house, so you can set some parameters. Of all people, you're likely aware how important boundaries are, given the blurring of the personal and professional that is standard in family businesses.

Here are some tips:

Don't instinctively top up people's drinks - and pour just one glass if you know someone is driving

Be judicious with teens. Small amounts of alcohol consumed in their parents' presence seems to inoculate teens against binge drinking, according to a 2004 study, which showed that kids who drank with their parents were half as likely to say they'd had alcohol in the past month and a third as likely to say they'd had five or more consecutive drinks. "Drinking with parents appears to have a protective effect," the researchers found.

Have ample food and non-alcoholic drinks available.

Above all, avoid communicating the expectation - through "bottom's up!" exhortations - that overindulging is the same thing as having a good time, or that alcohol makes fun possible.

The idea is that normalizing sensible, social drinking will help people behave more moderately - even in bad times - and help kids learn about responsible drinking.

Dwight Heath, an anthropologist at Brown University in Providence, R.I., and an expert in alcohol consumption, agrees with this moderate approach, adding that 90 per cent of people who drink alcohol have no problem with it at all. Countries that have a wine culture, such as Italy and Spain, have a quarter of the alcoholism evident in North America, he said. "The problem is not with drinking but with drinking too fast, too much, or for the wrong reasons," he said, adding that, even if 90 per cent of the population can drink alcohol without undue risk, "that does not diminish the problems in the 10 per cent that are left. It's not safe if it's not done moderately."

At the same time, culture affects how people view social drinking - whether as a safety valve, as group bonding, or as a "truth serum." In North America, fishermen, miners, sailors and academics are expected to drink together, Dr. Heath suggests, while in Japan, working groups retire to drink collectively at the end of the day, and if you don't go along, you're likely to be squeezed out - of your team, and your job. "In that context, feelings get aired that can't ordinarily be expressed, with the understanding that everything is forgotten the next day," he said.

The problem you have is that sanctioned drinking at holiday parties overlaps with our cultural no-nos - mixing alcohol with work, and mixing alcohol with kids. We pretend that if they don't see it or can't have it, kids won't try it, which is wishful thinking.

A study recently published by Samantha Wells, a researcher at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in London, Ont., shows that when they think alcohol won't be available or that it will be too expensive, somewhere between 55 per cent and 64 per cent of young people engage in pre-drinking or pre-loading; that is, "slamming beers down," or "taking a solid nose-dive into the sauce," before they step out, phrases used in blog entries quoted in Dr. Wells' study.

Without the restraints imposed in family and public settings, those students are more likely to become part of that troublesome 10 per cent - those who drink too much, too fast, or too seriously.

Your role, as host, is to help your guests stay firmly in the middle and avoid the dour or dire extremes.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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