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## ***GUEST COLUMN – Avoiding Holiday Taboos***

**By Elaine Varelas, Managing Partner of Business Development, Keystone Partners**

The holiday season is here, and with it comes that festive mood in the office. I always look forward to parties, vacation days and baked goods in the break room. What I don't look forward to is the holiday syndrome that besets a select few employees, a condition that completely erases their common sense. It feels like we just got past the fiasco of summer casual where certain oblivious staffers considered plastic flip-flops and belly-baring halter tops appropriate work attire. Now it's time for holiday snafus.

Here's a memo I just wish I could send to those with "Holiday Syndrome":

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**TO: Employees**  
**FROM: HR Manager**  
**RE: Holiday No-Nos**

Here are a few tips to keep in mind during the upcoming holiday season:

**Your Favorite Charity is Not Your Co-workers'**—We all value charitable contributions, but don't hit the campaign trail at work. Donation fatigue sets in early, and there are only so many wreaths, candles and rolls of wrapping paper people can buy. And while everyone is sincerely proud of you for your charitable nature, it isn't fair to ask others to support your pet cause. It's especially inappropriate for managers to solicit donations from staff.

**Give No Gifts That Involve Underwear or Need Batteries**—If you find yourself browsing at Spencer Gifts or Victoria's Secret for the perfect office gift, drop the item and leave the store immediately. Unless you've been dying to find out what those sexual harassment seminars are all about, leave the risqué gifts for your significant other.

**The Fifth Grade Party Rule Applies**—If you're having a holiday party at home, either invite the whole department or keep your lips sealed at work. It's okay to only invite a few colleagues; just send the invitations to their homes. Also, try not to talk about what a blast it was the next day at the staff meeting. When in doubt, think about what your elementary school teacher would advise.

**No More Cheapskates**—This one is especially for managers. Don't re-gift that bottle of liquor you received for your birthday—in fact, as a general rule, avoid giving food as gifts. Employees don't need more cookies. What they really want is a bonus or heartfelt token of your appreciation.

**Wait Until the Last Minute to Disperse Gifts**—Managers should wait until right before employees leave for the holidays to give gifts. Otherwise they set the stage for reciprocity. Employees will then stress about what to get the boss. Co-workers should also beware of gift giving. It's easy to get swept up in the spirit, but it's difficult to get out of it.

**Decorate Discreetly**—A menorah in your cubicle is fine, just don't petition to have a manger moved into the lobby. Remember, a company that values diversity cannot hold any holiday above another.

**No Religious E-mails**—Jesus may love me, but I don't need The Three Wise Men visiting me at work. Chain e-mails are always inappropriate, but religious ones are doubly so. On the top of my wish list this holiday season is never getting one of these again.

**Dress for Work**—Office parties create so many opportunities for faux pas. That see-through micro-mini might look spectacular on the red carpet, but the cafeteria lighting just won't do it justice. A work holiday party is still a work event. Dress appropriately for it.

**No Dirty Dancing**—The image of a former colleague bumping and grinding on the dance floor with his tie wrapped around his head will forever be burned into my brain. Spare employees this misfortune. Your staff and co-workers may never be able to look at you the same way again.

**No PDAs**—Mistletoe or not, blatant public displays of affection are never a good idea at work—enough said.

**Know Your Limit**—Having a glass of champagne at the office party is fine, just don't end up passed out on the bathroom floor. There's a reason why there's a spike in firings near the holidays. It's all about the office party.

**Be Kind to the Skeleton Crew**—Although it may seem like magic that your trash can is empty every morning, it's the effort of the overnight staff. Don't forget these hardworking employees when doling out gifts.

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Unfortunately, you really can't send this memo to employees, and truthfully most don't need it. What you can do is remind people to be respectful of others and their beliefs, and if necessary reiterate policies from the employee manual. You can also let managers know you are there to help if they run into any sticky situations within their departments.

It can be difficult for HR managers at holiday time. Nobody wants to be a scrooge. But it's an HR manager's job to reign in those with Holiday Syndrome and create an environment for all employees to enjoy the holidays at work.

*Elaine Varelas is Managing Partner of Business Development at Keystone Partners, a career management firm headquartered in Boston, and has over 20 years of career development and HR experience. She also serves on the board of directors for Career Partners International, the world's largest career management partnership. To learn more about Elaine or for more information about Keystone Partners, please visit [www.keystonepartners.com](http://www.keystonepartners.com).*