



Life of the Party

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QUESTION: Every year I throw a year-end holiday party at my home for my staff, their families, a few vendors and external partners. I provide everything, all the food and beverages - including adult beverages. Last year, my newly hired assistant was totally trashed by the end of the evening. Her husband had to carry her to the car. The next day at work she was very apologetic and promised she would never do it again. Well, we just had a Halloween party and she did it again. Although not quite as inebriated as she was last year, she did drink a great deal and began acting very inappropriately toward a vendor. So much so that I had to ask her to leave. She has proven to be a good assistant, and has not come to work under the influence as far as I know. I'm not ready to fire her, but these behaviors are sending me so many red flags. I feel something must be done, I just don't know what.

ANSWER: The pattern of behavior exhibited by your assistant should be a cause for concern. Although it was a party, it was also work related. This is especially true since you invited vendors and external partners. Her behavior reflected negatively on your company and therefore you not only have the right, but you also have an obligation, to address this issue. Think about it - on two occasions, she was unable to control her drinking at her boss's home. This is quite telling. While you can't be sure that she has a problem with alcohol, you sound confident that her behavior likely impacted the trust and relationship with her co-workers and your vendor, which could impact the workplace.

This solution begins with solid documentation. Write down what transpired at both parties. Write down the apology she made last year and her promise that it would not happen again. Describe the impact her behavior has on the company, including her relationship with the vendor. As you document what occurred, stick to behaviors that you actually observed, not any assumptions you may have. Read through your employee handbook (if you have one) and see if you have a policy on alcohol use. Typically, these policies indicate that drinking by those of legal age is allowed at work-related events, but that staff must maintain the ability to conduct themselves in a professional manner. The policy likely also states that you can discipline up to and including termination for violation of this policy.

There are options for your next course of action. You can (1) terminate her, (2) write her up and/or (3) support her to go through rehabilitation services if she discloses an ongoing issue with alcohol use/abuse. I recommend formal disciplinary action based upon the facts you have presented. Use the documentation to write a disciplinary document that outlines what happened at this year's Halloween party, what happened last year and her promise that it would not happen again. The written warning must clearly state that if anything like this happens again, if she appears under the influence or her behavior poorly represents the company, she may be terminated.

If she admits to having a problem with alcohol, you may choose to encourage rehab with the contingency that you will retain her employment only if she successfully completes the program and does not come to

work under the influence. If you do this, you need to know in advance who is going to pay for the rehab. You are not obligated to pay (and I would recommend that you don't), even if you require it for her continued employment. If she is successful in her treatment then bring her back like you promised, but monitor her closely. If you even slightly suspect she is drinking again, address the behavior that led you to this conclusion and consider termination.

As a proactive measure for this year's year-end holiday party, I recommend that you review your alcohol policy with all staff, remind them that the party is a work event, and outline your expectations. Consider limiting the alcoholic options you provide at your event(s) and/or increasing the number of non-alcoholic options to encourage good decision-making.