

Your office-party dilemmas, sorted

Q Help! A co-worker is making drunken advances. How can I politely draw the line?

“The goal is to shut down the situation without hurting any feelings,” Courtenay explains. “Be polite but firm and clear, saying, ‘I’m flattered, but I’m not looking for anything more than friendship.’”

“When it comes to communication, 55 percent is body language, 38 percent is tone and only 7 percent of it is words, so keep your tone definite, but gentle. Smile at him, with uncrossed arms – don’t turn your back on him as this can feel quite confrontational.

“If he’s still pushy, make an excuse to visit the toilet or get a drink. Integrate into a group on your return; he’s unlikely to keep pressing if you’re with others.”

Q I feel awkward making small talk with my boss – what are great conversation starters?

“To begin with, avoid anything that’s potentially controversial. Sex, politics and religion are off the menu,” advises Courtenay. “When it comes to small talk, keep things inviting. That means steering clear of negative topics, like why you’re annoyed with your boyfriend, or how tired you are. It’s tricky for your boss to respond comfortably to this kind of talk.

“Great places to start include the lovely party venue or a compliment (if it’s genuine!). Then move on to universal topics,

Courtenay Carey, CEO of Joburg’s The School of Etiquette (etischool.co.za), and image consultant Chata Romano, founder of chataromano.com, give their tips for handling those awkward moments.

like a movie you’re excited to see, so it’s easy for your boss to reciprocate.

“Really nervous? Brainstorm topics in advance, so you don’t get tongue-tied. Finally, end the conversation in a positive way that invites further discussion later on: ‘It was lovely chatting to you. I look forward to hearing about that film once



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you’ve seen it. Enjoy the party!”

Q I had a drunken hookup with a colleague and I’m dreading Monday. What should I do?

“First things first: an office romance isn’t necessarily a bad thing!” says Courtenay. “You’re likely to meet like-minded

people at work, so if your hookup reflects real feelings, why not use it to initiate a date? Just keep any further romance out of office hours to stay professional.

“If, however, it was a mistake, don’t do what you probably want to do by ignoring him on Monday. It’ll cause hurt feelings and give other colleagues a reason to gossip. When you bump into him, smile and greet him.

“Whatever happens, end that first post-party encounter cordially. It will also set the tone for how colleagues view things (awkward or no big deal).

“Still feeling uneasy? Try talking to him directly. But avoid doing this at work; go for coffee (a drink might feel too much like a date), so that you can chat privately.”

Q What’s an appropriate office-party outfit?

“The trick is to hint at the areas you want to accentuate, but not to show them off in an obvious way,” recommends Chata. “A shift dress that falls just above the knee is a great universal choice.

“The silhouette accentuates your figure without overtly showing it off. Opt for fabrics that are soft and have movement, but nothing figure-hugging; you don’t want to be overly sexy!”

“Add va-va-voom via accessories like chandelier earrings, a bejewelled necklace or strappy heels,” she adds.

SARAH BROWNING