

Potluck Rebellion

Question: I work in an office where traditionally worker birthdays have been celebrated with a potluck lunch. My position is responsible for organizing the event.

When I started two years, ago, workers seemed enthusiastic about the potlucks. However, some people are now saying that potlucks are too much hassle and they do not want to do them anymore. This does not offend me, but it does present some problems.

1) My director likes doing the potlucks, and she and I thought that clearly making them voluntary would ease the tension. However, those who dislike the potlucks have been complaining instead of excusing themselves.

2) Transitioning away from potlucks into just a cake-and-ice cream-style event may offend people who are expecting a potluck lunch party.

Therefore, I need suggestions for easing the transition and any suggestions for potluck lunch alternatives.

Also, if anyone wants to comment on why the itty biddy petty things set people off at work, that would be informative as well. Thanks! -- *Anonymous, California*

Comments

You may want to circulate an announcement that the potluck lunches will cease as of a certain date due to the dwindling interest. You may want to drag it out until the end of the year to make a clean break or simply pick the middle of the year. It's a no-win situation, you will either have people upset they still have to participate or upset it's ending. Either way, if you give them notice it should be easier than just ending it on a whim.

Posted by: Carrie M. | February 25, 2005 at 12:07 PM

Have you considered making the potluck a monthly or quarterly event? If we had a potluck for every birthday within our company, we'd have one everyday! People are busier than ever outside of work, but still desire to be involved in events at work, even when they don't think they have time. Make a suggestion to your boss to cut back on the number of potlucks - I think it will make everyone happy, plus allow them time to plan and stay involved. It will hopefully be a successful, more-participated-in potluck (with fewer or no) complaints! If that still doesn't work, then I'd consider what Carrie M said.

Posted by: Holly | February 25, 2005 at 12:11 PM

My company solved a similar situation by catering the meals and asking staff to split the costs. This saves them the trouble of preparing a dish, yet also provides an opportunity to share a meal. Staff understand that they only

need to contribute if they plan to take part in the meal. You might also consider having one meal a month, rather than individual meals on each staff person's birthday.

Try asking your staff for input. That makes them aware that changes to your current practice may be coming, and gives you an opportunity to hear their suggestions.

Good luck!

Posted by: Anonymous | February 25, 2005 at 12:14 PM

First of all, as an H.R. Director, I do not force employees to "work" at home. Asking individuals to bring something in from home (pot luck) and spend time on a work-related event is an invasion into their private time. Voluntary or not, I would be concerned about an hourly employee who is making something at home, to bring into work and not being paid for it. I would highly recommend switching to a monthly or quarterly luncheon (i.e. Pizza delivered, or deli catered) without charging the employees. That way, the employee feels as if the Company is truly saying "we appreciate you."

Posted by: LIZ | February 25, 2005 at 12:20 PM

Are you doing this for each birthday? That can become a lot of work. We started celebrating birthdays once a month for all birthdays that month. It's not as personal, but it still works. Be up-front with everyone and ASK THEM what they want. Let them vote on it. Perhaps you can do the potluck occasionally but do something simpler most of the time. Be sure to discuss this with your director first! As for petty things that set people off: people like to have a voice in things, a little bit of control in their life. A potluck lunch may seem like a minor issue, but they are probably feeling like they MUST participate even if told that they don't, which makes it a HUGE issue. Give people a choice.

Posted by: Diana | February 25, 2005 at 12:25 PM

My first question is how often are you having the potlucks? If you have a potluck for each birthday, it could be too overwhelming for some to come up with something for every potluck. Consider one potluck each month and celebrate all the birthdays for that month.

Or if people are seeing a potluck as an inconvenience, try asking for a contribution towards a pizza lunch that would be delivered.

Good luck.

Posted by: Marnita | February 25, 2005 at 12:26 PM

I think a good idea may be to do these 'birthday lunches' once a month, and instead of everyone bringing a dish let the birthday people decide where they want food brought in from and then just collect a donation to cover the cost. It also depends on how many people you are talking about. If you have a small group do a monthly lunch outside the office and split the bill later with the others.

Just remember everyone gets busy from time to time and depending on how far away from work they are bringing food into work is not always easy.

Posted by: Elaine | February 25, 2005 at 01:32 PM

In our small office the birthday person chooses a local restaurant that does take out, we order, pick up or have it delivered and split the cost (we pay for the birthday lunch) and we get the cake from a local bakery (also split the cost). Since our downtown location is near many eating places, we have a wide variety of cuisines during the year. The large office across the hall has a quarterly potluck & the larger office upstairs does birthday of the month with cake & ice cream only. So, there are many solutions to your problem short of eliminating birthday festivities entirely. As for "petty" complaints, if most of the complainers are support staff, they have little or no control over their jobs or working conditions and since the only power they have is to be negative, they exercise it by complaining.

Posted by: Sara | February 25, 2005 at 02:12 PM

I do not agree with the other employees having to donate money towards the birthday lunch. If it is a company policy to celebrate birthdays, the company should foot the bill.

If you keep the potluck policy in place, yet state that no one is required to attend, that really puts a burden on the ones who don't want to attend - people could and do judge others and it can create unneeded tension in the office.

I agree with the first suggestion posted (by Carrie M.).

In our company, I arrange the celebration of birthdays and I get a cake, pie or some other celebratory goodies and a card which everyone signs. People like doing that here. I have even taken to cutting the cake for the birthday person, which has been greatly appreciated by everyone. I always buy cards that are appropriate for the particular person - they feel special that way. We have 10 people in the office and have been celebrating birthdays in this manner for the past 40 years.

Posted by: Cindy | February 25, 2005 at 06:22 PM

Send out a questionnaire to everyone involved (no space for their name on the form) and when the results come through, nobody will be offended i.e. the democratic approach to anonymous responses.

Posted by: Anonymous | February 28, 2005 at 09:07 AM

I think that having an office celebration once a quarter is a good idea. This celebration doesn't appear to be a company policy, so asking the employees to contribute to either a pizza, cake or catered event isn't really a lot to ask. Maybe you all could alternate have a potluck for one celebration, then a pizza or order from a local deli. When you do the same thing over and over people will eventually lose their enthusiasm. Also, remember that even when people are given the option to participate in a potluck or not there are some who will criticize those who don't participate. That maybe why you have so many people complaining.

Posted by: Tee | February 28, 2005 at 12:16 PM

My company has cake once a month to celebrate everyone's birthdays that month. On the person's birthday, he

or she picks a local restaurant and anyone who wants to attend can the lunch. The company pays for the birthday person's lunch. Everyone else pays for him or herself.

Posted by: Jennifer | March 01, 2005 at 11:14 AM

Our company started a Social Committee 2 years ago. Our company sets aside approximately \$3,000 for staff birthday lunches per year that we plan. This has worked very well compared to similar past birthday events. We only have seven birthday events. September through November. (Christmas dinner different budget) For the new year we start back in February through May. We have different events. Pizza, barbecue, Mexican Fiesta, (Soup, Salad, and Subs). There are less complaints because we have a larger variety of events and the company pays.

Posted by: Linda | March 01, 2005 at 12:33 PM

My previous company celebrated birthdays once a month. Employees signed up for a month other than their own birthday and the committee provided the refreshments. It was a hoot as each team tried to outdo each other with the birthday theme and games.

Posted by: Janet | March 05, 2005 at 11:10 AM