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Should the Boss Be on Your Holiday Gift List?

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Are you considering adding your boss to your gift-giving list this year?

"Tread carefully," warns Jo Bennett, partner in the New York City executive search firm Battalia Winston. "It's not all that common and I think if you want to give a gift to your boss, you need to think about what's in it for you."

Here are some simple do's and don'ts to keep your holiday giving happy.

Do your homework.

Buying your boss a gift is just like any other workplace project. So research the history of gift-giving in your office:

- Do people give gifts to the boss?
- If so, what kind?
- Has it ever backfired for any of your coworkers, and if so, how?

Don't make your boss uncomfortable.

Now that you know the tradition, think about why you want to give your boss a gift in the first place.

"If the answer is because you want to curry favor, I wouldn't do it," said Bennett. "The risk is that your boss will see it as trying to twist the relationship and get an advantage. You don't want to make your boss uncomfortable."

Do be sincere.

The best reason to give your boss a gift is to thank him or her for a specific act of kindness during the year that went "above and beyond the call of duty," Bennett said.

"Maybe your boss smoothed over a particular issue you had with a customer," she suggested. "Or maybe your boss gave you some great career advice. In that case, give something small with a nice card of genuine thanks."

Don't get personal.

The worst gifts for bosses are expensive or personal, said Dallas-based business etiquette expert Colleen Rickenbacher, author of "Be on Your Best Business Behavior."

"The bottom line is always, 'Don't give something that touches the body,'" she said. Avoid clothes or perfume. Even flowers could be perceived as overly personal and start coworkers gossiping.

Do cut costs.

One of the best ways to give your boss a gift, say both Rickenbacher and Bennett, is to buy her something as a team. If each person gives \$10, you can give your boss a gift certificate to her favorite restaurant or buy him a pricier gift that his assistant recommends.

That way, no one gets singled out as a brown-noser, and everyone shares the holiday spirit.

Or consider something inexpensive and consumable: jam you make at home, wine made in your garage, or cookies are all simple and genuine ways to share the holiday spirit without crossing any lines.

Don't treat your boss like family.

"If someone in your family gives you a gift, you better give one back," said Bennett. "But it's different in an office."

Don't feel the need to reciprocate if your boss gives you something. At worst, Rickenbacher said rushing to respond with a gift could end up looking like an afterthought.

"All you have to do when you receive a gift is show appreciation," she said, "and follow up with a thank-you note."

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