

**(U) Ask Zelda!: Stuffed, Then Stuffed**

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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Dear Zelda,

More than once, I've been the lowest pay grade at a luncheon and wound up paying way more than my share because others (much higher pay grades) shorted their contribution to the bill. In particular, I was at the "end of the line" at the register at an office Holiday party in a restaurant. Our car's passengers had to cover the other tables that shorted the waitresses. It really stung to be a lowly clerical with daycare expenses nearly equal to my income and have to kick in another \$20 (in addition to the \$10 that generously covered my sandwich and tip) to make up for their stinginess. Seriously, all of us in that last car had to empty our wallets to cover the other tables' bills. Other than avoid being the last to leave an event, how would Zelda address that sticky situation? Should we have asked for reimbursement from the cheapskates?

-- Not a Moneybags

Dear Moneybags (NOT!),

Yes, I think it would have been perfectly acceptable for one of the occupants of that last car to send a note to the other attendees stating what happened and asking them to consider chipping in to defray the extra cost incurred by the "stuckees." Or they could politely suggest that someone forgot to leave his share and "if that person was you," to please give your contribution to [name].

I like to think that your co-workers are not intentionally shorting the waitress. Maybe they simply are not good at math. Or maybe the waitress asked, "Would you like a salad with that?" and the person assumed it came with the meal, but there was an extra charge for it. If someone ordered several appetizers for the table and said, "We can all share," maybe he assumed everyone would pitch in but the others thought he was treating. Also, on a very long tab it's easy to overlook something that was yours. And sometimes the waitress makes a mistake, charging for something that no one ordered, or the price of an entree is keyed into the computer wrong.

But it sounds like this has happened to you more than once, so perhaps there are repeat offenders in your office. It doesn't matter what their pay grade; everyone should pay their full share of the expenses. Shorting the waitress--whether knowingly or through ignorance--is rude and low class, not only to the wait staff but to the colleagues who get stuck making up the difference. And it especially rankles if the lower pay grades are subsidizing the higher pay grades.

**Guidelines**

When dining out with a group, be sure to calculate the cost of your entree, appetizer (shared or otherwise), dessert, drink, and any refills. Then figure the tax (varies by state; also, the amount of tax may be higher on alcoholic beverages than on the rest of the meal, depending on your location) and gratuity (15% percent is traditionally standard; 20% is the norm for the circles I travel in). Now round up to the nearest dollar.\* If treating a guest, such as a departing co-worker, add the agreed-upon amount for her share to your total. If you partook of some food that another person ordered "for the table," be sure everyone is clear who is paying for it and how much.

No calculator? I find an easy way to figure tax and tip is to divide my food + drink total by 4. That comes out to be 25%, which equates to 6% tax and 19% tip in Maryland. Then I round up. (So much

nicer when MD tax was 5% and it was an even 20% tip.) If these general guidelines seem alien to you, I urge you to do an Internet search for tipping rules on a reputable website.

### Mitigation Techniques

For the future, your office can avoid the situation you described by adopting one of these practices.

- **Request separate checks for each table.** While someone still might not put in enough, it's easier to spot when funds are short and narrows the list of who owes more. Even better is separate checks for each person, if the restaurant is willing to do this.
- **Circulate a menu in advance and have people preorder.** The organizer should have the participants itemize everything they want for lunch and list these items on a separate index card for each attendee, calculating the tax and tip. Have each person pay his total *in advance* and bring the index cards to the restaurant to remind people what they ordered. Anything in addition to what is on the card must be paid for on the spot.
- **Designate one mathematically-minded person to collect the money.** This person would figure out what each person owes when the bill arrives, and tell everyone her total with tax and tip; then make sure they receive that much (or more) from her. When people randomly throw bills on the table or in a circulating folio, it's hard to keep track of who paid what.
- **Keep an office luncheon slush fund.** For example, when taking someone out to lunch as a farewell, everyone adds a dollar or two (or five, depending on the number of people and price of an average entree) to cover the guest's meal; any extra money over and above the actual cost goes into this slush fund. If you run short at a luncheon, the slush fund can cover the deficit, rather than the last ones to leave emptying their wallets.

As you see, there's no need to eat and run in order to avoid being stuck with someone else's bill. So order that dessert or second cup of coffee, sit back, and enjoy your lunch out.

*-Zelda*

\* Not a requirement, but it makes it "neater" than ending up with a pile of coins for the waitress, which invariably falls out of the bill presentation portfolio and scatters on the floor.

(U) Looking for some of the older "Ask Zelda" columns? They are filed away in the archives under the "Ask Zelda! 2010" and "Ask Zelda! 2011" and "Ask Zelda! 2012" and "Ask Zelda! 2013" series. Also, if you'd like to submit a question of your own to Zelda, just use the "comments/suggestions about this article" button below to send it in.

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