

Talking to Employees About Personal Hygiene

One of the more uncomfortable situations a manager or supervisor can face is confronting an employee about personal hygiene. There is no way around it – discussing issues of personal appearance, odor, and cleanliness can be downright awkward. However, the damage done by doing nothing can be even worse. If left unchecked, a hygiene issue can not only damage an employee's reputation, but it can damage the company's reputation and business performance.

Identifying the Issue

Before stepping into a conversation with an employee over personal hygiene, a manager should be sure to have first-hand knowledge of the situation. Do not rely on hearsay or information solely from others. Make an effort to gather information personally. This allows for honest and open discussions that avoid involving other employees and making the situation more awkward.

Not all personal hygiene issues are the same. There can be many different causes for things like body odor, tattered clothing, and unkempt appearance, including:

- **Cultural Differences** – Can a hairstyle be attributed to a cultural or religious custom? Do the cooking practices of the person's cultural heritage use strong spices that may leave scents on clothing and hair?
- **Financial Issues** – Has there been a change in financial status of the employee that could impede their ability to

obtain new clothes, expensive cleaning products, etc.?

- **Medical Concerns** – Does the employee have a medical condition that is the cause of the situation? Is the employee going through medical treatments that can affect their appearance or odor? Many medications and treatments result in hair loss, sensitive skin, rashes, etc., that can make frequent showering painful and difficult.
- **Emotional Distress** – Mental health concerns can drain the emotional resources of a person and make self-care seem very difficult, unimportant, unpleasant.

Whatever the cause may be, gathering the information *before* talking with the employee can help a manager address the problem appropriately.

Having the Hard Conversation

The next step is having a conversation with the employee. There are typically two ways to address the hygiene issue, either as a whole-group reminder or as a one-on-one conversation.

Group reviews can be an effective way to remind everyone about the company's standards for personal cleanliness and appearance. A manager can use company policy regarding appearance and professionalism to initiate the reminder. Reviewing the standards with everyone can take the pressure off having to single one person out individually and is effective if there have been occasional lapses in adherence by more than one employee. However, if there is only one employee who is challenged



with hygiene issues and this is well-known throughout the group, a group reminder may cause the employee to feel singled out and embarrassed.

Some situations necessitate a more direct approach. Following are several guidelines when meeting with an employee one-to-one:

- **Address the issue sooner rather than later.** The longer the discussion is delayed, the more likely that the employee becomes the victim of office gossip.
- **Be discreet.** This kind of conversation should happen away from the curious eyes/ears of co-workers. If meeting in a manager's office is too formal or obvious, choose a neutral location when no one else is present.
- **When possible, meet towards the end of the day.** The individual may feel self-conscious, so meeting at the end of the day alleviates a day full of worry and embarrassment.
- **Reinforce the employee's positive attributes** (hard worker, valuable team member, etc.).
- **Do not assign blame or give unsolicited advice.** Approach the situation as any other performance issue, one that has a solution that can be found if both parties work together. Ask the employee what support or help might be needed.
- **Do not attempt to diagnose.** If the employee mentions personal concerns that are affecting their ability to meet hygiene standards, provide the employee with an EAP brochure and recommend contacting the EAP to help sort through the personal challenges that are affecting hygiene.
- **Remain calm.** If an employee becomes defensive or emotional, try to bring the discussion back to support for their performance and confidence in their abilities.



“Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.”

~ Margaret Wheatley

Sample Conversation Starters

Still unsure about how to initiate the discussion? Here are a few examples to help you get started:

“Hi Stan. I know this may be a bit awkward, but we need to have a talk about general hygiene in the workplace. I know it may not be easy to talk about it, but like any other aspect of a job it is something that we need to address. I have observed lately...”

“Come on in Jean. Thanks for stopping by to chat for a minute. I just want to mention something to you. It's a little awkward and I don't mean to offend you at all. I've just noticed lately that you have had a noticeable odor. Sometimes this is the kind of thing people don't realize about themselves, so I wanted to bring it to your attention.”

“So Chris, I wanted to meet today to go over a few things with you. Your job performance is going really well. Your customer service skills are great. You know how to make a customer feel welcome and you do a nice job finding products that will help them. One area that could use some improvement though is personal hygiene. As you know, you work directly with our customers. Your appearance and hygiene can have a big impact on how your customers view you and the company. I want to help make sure they see you for the great service provider that you are.”



Needless to say, this type of conversation is not easy. The more comfortable a manager is with the facts of the situation and how to approach the discussion, the more likely it is that a successful outcome can be found. Remember that your role is to support your employees' success. Ignoring hygiene issues does your employees no favor. Their success depends on your caring enough to talk about the difficult things as well as provide positive feedback!

Contact PAS

To discuss your employee concerns with a PAS management consultant and obtain guidance in addressing difficult issues with your employees.

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