

Moment of Truth

You know you have to speak with your employee about an awkward subject. The effect he or she is having upon coworkers or clients due to difficult or strange behavior, body odor, improper attire, or some other equally distressing issue simply can't be ignored.

Managers *hate* this kind of counseling session. It strikes at such personal habits, ones that in outside situations are often subjective. For instance, is a person's attire a reflection of indifference, style, or utter cluelessness? Do you really have a right to comment? What if body odor is due to a cultural difference? Is it fair to ask an employee to submit to our standards of cleanliness?

Before you get to the conference room, step back and ensure you're fully prepared to address the situation.

1. **Know the legal hot buttons.** One of the reasons the Awkward Conversation makes managers break out in a sweat is the fear of stepping on someone's rights and setting the company up for a lawsuit—so find out what you need to know before you proceed. Ask HR if there are any issues of which you need to be aware that you don't already know (medical conditions? religious qualifications?). This will allow you to inquire if medications might be creating an employee's horrific bad breath, or if they have informed HR of attire connected to religious tenets. If they haven't, then making such claims when being counseled does not automatically protect them. It certainly keeps you from being accused of stepping on their rights, which leads me to the next point.
2. **Know the rights.** Be settled in your mind upon what is a right and what is a privilege. *It is not an employee's*

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civil right to wear jeans to work. Let them insist they should be judged only on their performance; your job is to point out that part of their performance is following the company dress code or doing what you, as the supervisor, reasonably request of them. It is not a right to exhibit poor hygiene. It is not a right to treat clients discourteously and pass it off with, "That's just my personality." Don't let the subject of rights derail the conversation. If your company has a written code in the areas concerned, you have the best justification for your direction.

- 3. Know your authority.** You absolutely DO have the right to address these issues (and when I am told, "You have no right!", this is what I always respond). It is well within your authority as a supervisor to expect your employee to exhibit proper hygiene, wear appropriate attire, and act in a mature and respectful manner. If you can't insist on these things, by what authority do you expect anything of an employee? You are the manager. The employee is the employee. It's not a relationship of peers, no matter how close and friendly you may be.

Now you're prepared to handle this discussion. Take a deep breath and follow these steps:

- 1. Explain you must address a sensitive issue** and it may be uncomfortable for both of you. There's nothing wrong with telling the employee you are a bit nervous about it, along with "nevertheless, it must be discussed."
- 2. State the problem directly.** "Your coworkers are complaining of your body odor" or "Your attire at the reception desk is unacceptable."
- 3. Tell them what is expected:** "You are expected to bathe everyday and wear deodorant."
- 4. Ask if it is understood.**
- 5. Follow up with an email** in which you state succinctly what was discussed. Don't pontificate; document. Close with something like,

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“This should close the matter. I don’t expect to have to bring it up again.”

Somewhere in this discussion, you may have to ask questions so you can understand what may be driving the problem. Stay strong if there’s unreasonable resistance—again, you have every right to bring up matters such as this because they affect coworkers and/or clients. If you run into a snag, you can call for HR to step into the meeting (work with your HR department ahead of time so they can be at the ready). If there is extreme resistance, well . . . employees do not have a right to disrupt the workplace. Consider whether or not such an employee should be retained.

Here’s what most often happens: the employee is embarrassed but instantly promises to rectify the problem. Honestly—99% of the time, the meeting won’t last more than ten minutes. You will have acted like a supervisor and navigated the awkwardness, and the issue will be behind you.

You may now return to the really fun work of being a manager! *

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The rate at which a person can mature is directly proportional to the embarrassment he can tolerate.

~ Douglas Engelbart, American inventor and Internet pioneer

Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow.

~ Swedish Proverb

Just do it.

~ Nike brand motto

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Stop by www.YourCharacterIsShowing.com and listen to one of the many interviews Sue has done with business people on how their character strengths have guided them in their work and personal lives! Entrepreneurs, talented sales professionals, a veterinarian, a dentist—and more—can provide insight on the principles from which they make decisions and manage relationships.

More interviews to come in the fall!

About Sue

Sue Thompson is a personality expert, etiquette trainer, and an instructor in life lessons. Her work on recognizing and developing talent, identifying personalities and working effectively with the people who possess them, responding appropriately to difficult experiences, treating others with respect, and behaving like a professional have caused companies and business organizations throughout the country to value her consulting skills. She trains those entering the workforce how to present themselves with style and authority; new employees in the importance of respecting one's work and the workplace; managers in the value of understanding employees' talent and temperament; and everyone in the timeless rules of behavior that will always bespeak excellence.

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