

Sue Thompson's

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The Awkward Conversation

You've got to have a talk with an employee who is dressed so inappropriately for work, you can't imagine what they were thinking as they left the house. Or if they *were* thinking. Do they really not know how to dress for a corporate office? Are they oblivious to how others around them attire themselves for a professional atmosphere?

Even more painful and difficult is when you must have a discussion about body odor. How others cannot smell themselves, I don't know. It's true we don't smell as we are smelled, but that's the reason we're taught (well, most of us, anyway) to bathe regularly (like, daily).

Counseling sessions such as this are one of the situations over which managers lose sleep. They're so afraid of their own discomfort, of offending someone, or of saying something that could get the company sued that the situation is simply avoided. That avoidance insults and injures the people who must work with the offender.

The conversation must be had. IT MUST. For goodness' sake—you're a manager. This is part of managing and supervising. Grab your intestines and remind yourself that this comes with the position. Don't even start with the I-didn't-sign-up-for-this complaint. You absolutely *did* sign up for this when you went for that job that required supervising one or more individuals.

Here's the problem: you haven't had any training to actually *be* an effective manager. Oh, sure, you've had some informative seminars or courses on what I call the clinical aspects of managerial work—the role of the manager as it pertains to finances and procedures and planning and operations and recordkeeping—but virtually none on the emotional role of the job, which is far and away the most potentially powerful aspect of your work. That's because very few instructors provide training on the emotional stuff. We're not supposed to be

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emotional at work. We're supposed to be businesslike (meaning unemotional) and professional (again, unemotional) and adult (ditto).

Allow me to state the obvious: WORK IS EMOTIONAL. Human beings are emotional creatures, and while we can certainly compartmentalize to some degree, we bring our emotions with us wherever we go. We can't park them in the lobby and go throughout our days without events touching our emotions. If that were possible, we'd never become incensed at the stupidity of human resources or the shortsightedness of the folks in accounting. We'd never connect in a substantive way with people with whom we find ourselves spending long days week after week, year after year. We wouldn't have compassion for the coworker who's battling breast cancer or the guy who lost a child. We'd be automated workhorses, never losing our tempers, never sharing long heart-to-hearts or gut-splitting rounds of laughter.

So you've got to get a handle on this: work is emotional. Acknowledge it. Accept it. Meditate upon it.

If work is emotional, then managers need to have some mature emotional capabilities. They need to know how to express emotions appropriate for the workplace. They need to skillfully utilize, to the proper degree, things like bravery, humor, love, forgiveness, gratitude, and hope. They need to know how anger can help or hurt a situation and how it should be utilized in matters of discipline.

But so many managers are woefully inadequate in this area, this understanding and study of the emotional content we all bring to work. That's because in many cases, the leaders of companies recoil from the "touchy feely" talk of emotions. This is funny, because they will demand *their* way or force *their* issues, usually with intense displays of emotion, expecting employees to respond like wind-up toys. They will rage or sulk or act like very emotional middle-schoolers, but treat you for objecting to their poor behavior as though there's something wrong with *you*. Their immaturity will have a company constantly on the edge of morale hell, but they want nothing to do with that "fluffy, silly, worthless" consideration of the feelings of their highly paid carbon units.

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What's to be done? I'll tell you. WE'VE GOT TO TALK ABOUT IT. We've got to train managers in the strengths they will use most on the job:

- Observing the effect team members have on one another. This means being able to recognize personality styles and adjust when communicating.
- Negotiating the stress of the most difficult interactions—when employees exhibit outrageous behavior, for instance, or attire themselves like slovenly messes.
- Expressing themselves with honesty and integrity, exhibiting the values that matter most to them as individuals, when they'd rather blow up, give up, or hibernate.

I'll be addressing the awkward conversations in the next couple of issues. Stay tuned! *



The greatest mistake you can make in life is to be continually fearing you will make one.

~Elbert Hubbard, *The Note Book*, 1927

Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow.

~Swedish Proverb

Blessed is the person who is too busy to worry in the daytime and too sleepy to worry at night.

~Author Unknown

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YOUR CHARACTER IS SHOWING

Click here listen to interesting people talk about their character strengths!

You've read what I write about character strengths. You've listened in on interviews at YourCharacterIsShowing.com. Perhaps you've completed the free survey that provides you with your top five character strengths at The VIA Institute on Character. It might be time for you to delve a bit deeper, and here's your opportunity!

VIA has a new online course that is geared for those of you who want to start with something extremely practical. It's called "Building Strengths: Tools for working with Clients and Employees." It's perfect for anyone interested in expanding his or her knowledge of VIA character strengths—and ways to utilize them more meaningfully in your daily interactions, particularly in a professional atmosphere. Participants will learn to apply a strengths-based report with the help of two seasoned practitioners who will guide you with interactive Q&A, demonstrations, lectures, practice sessions, and much more!

The course begins Monday, July 16 and runs for 4 consecutive weeks from 5:00 PM to 7:00 PM EST. Register with a friend and you each receive \$50 off tuition!

Here is the [link](#) for the course.

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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