

DEALING WITH BAD HYGIENE AND MANNERS AT WORK



Management training tends to gloss over the truly sticky, sometimes personally offensive situations that occasionally crop up in the workplace. Situations that include:

- A co-workers' body odor that is bad enough to drive some team members to distraction (and make a skunk beg for mercy).
- Or the volume control on an employee's voice that seems to be stuck on "10."

When approached by a disgruntled employee complaining about having his olfactory senses unsettled by another member of the team, you can do better than simply leaving a stick of deodorant on the offending coworker's desk. There are three specific options a manager can pursue: "confront them directly, talk to someone who can talk to them, or learn to hold your breath." With any luck you won't ever have to discuss personal hygiene with an employee, but the possibility of having to confront a worker about some sort of embarrassing problem does exist. If you'd rather chew glass than directly confront an employee whose halitosis makes him the outcast of the office, take heart. You have options when it comes to managing a troubling worker.

If you feel a full frontal attack is in order, if you have the rapport with the person and you can get them in a really good mood, you might be able to talk to them about (the situation). It helps to be a good observer of other people who have approached them with issues in the past. One thing that we tend not to do enough in corporations is look around the office for people who have been more effective in dealing with that person and find out their secrets."

Jason Drew, an accounting manager, emphasizes the importance of creating a workplace environment that fosters open, relaxed, professional communication at all times. "The point that tends to get lost in all this is the relationship you have with your employees before you ever encounter a touchy situation. That goes a long way." Drew has found that adopting a firm yet open managing style has influenced his group in such a way that he is rarely interrupted with complaints that he feels are better dealt with *mano a mano*, so to speak. "I feel that they understand that I'm willing to listen to whatever complaint they may have, though at the same time they know when to handle things on their own."

Sometimes you simply aren't the right person for the job. If you lack a comfortable relationship with the offending employee, you very well may want to heed this advice: There are times when you carry too much baggage into the mix and you shouldn't deal with it. You have to find other channels, be it human resources, another co-worker, maybe another boss. I think that there is always somebody around who's figured it out. We tend not to work hard enough to learn from the collective wisdom of others.

A third and probably most valuable pointer in dealing with a tricky personnel issue is simply to ignore it. We have a limited number of options. We need to go down the list and, I hate to say it, but I think the option we don't pay enough attention to is simply tuning it out. There are fights that aren't worth fighting. "Why is it your business?"

Fortunately bad breath, body odor, and the like are not issues that routinely plague management. Most organizations outline personal hygiene matters in their employee handbook (dress code, grooming, maintaining a professional appearance) and leave it at that. If you do find yourself facing a possibly ticklish encounter, remember that an elegant solution does exist--you might just have to work a little harder to find it. Oftentimes in corporate America we view the environment as a one-way highway, but there are a lot of little, scenic back roads that we can pursue to maneuver through and get stuff done.