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## DOES YOUR DRESS CODE ADDRESS FLIP FLOP?

One of the most important things a manager can do to set healthy boundaries in the office is to define a dress code. It's more critical today than ever before. Young men today show up for job interviews wearing shorts and muscle shirts. Others look like they just crawled out of bed wearing baggy jeans pulled down to reveal their boxer shorts, baseball cap turned sideways and three-day stubble. Young women show up wearing mini skirts as if they just came from a nightclub. Others wear low-rise jeans, flip flops, and spaghetti strap tops with their bellies hanging out.

Managers ask me where it will stop. It will stop where you make it stop. Your values differ from those of other generations, and you must decide what's appropriate. Organizations struggle with this nationwide. Churches have relaxed dress codes to allow people to wear jeans and shorts. Most four-star restaurants no longer require coats and ties for men. While churches and restaurants are loosening their dress codes, other establishments are tightening theirs. A Burger King in Kentucky makes their employees remove all facial piercings when they clock in. Prohibiting facial piercings is a black and white proposition, but dress code becomes a murkier issue when trying to specify wardrobe do's and don'ts. Defining "business casual" for women is a nightmare. Fiserv Solutions in Jacksonville, Florida, offered the best solution I've seen. They went through dozens of magazines and clipped out pictures of women's fashion styles. They then pasted the photos on poster boards which they displayed in their break room. One board is labeled "No" and the other is labeled "Yes".

The key to making a dress code work is to keep it updated. Both private and government sectors are forced to constantly update their policies to keep up with social and technical trends. The Marine Corps updated its uniform regulations in 1996 to prohibit tattoos on the neck and head. The Army updated its policies in 2002 to authorize the wearing of pagers and cell phones for official Army business. The Air Force updated its policy on body piercing in 2003 to prohibit "body mutilation" such as split tongues. The Navy updated its policy on pagers in 2004 to allow sailors to wear personal digital assistants and cell phones for official Navy business. The new policy also allows female sailors to wear pants for official duty or even formal events. All branches of the military now have policies which require members to remove objectionable tattoos at their own expense. Failure to do so may result in punishment up to involuntary separation. The Walt Disney Company in Orlando, Florida, loosened its dress code in 2000 to allow moustaches. They loosened it again in 2003 to allow women to wear hoop earrings as long as they are no larger than a dime. They allow only one ring per ear, which must be worn at the bottom of the ear. Post earrings are allowed as long as they are no larger than a quarter. Women may wear open-toe and open-heel shoes, but hosiery is required. Men are allowed to wear braids in their hair as long as they are above the collar. Men are not allowed to wear Oxford style shirts.

Different generations in the workforce make dress code even more important. Generation X is highly independent and known for being non-conformist. They came of age when flannel and earthiness was trendy. They may show up with body parts fully covered, but with wet hair and no makeup. They believe the au natural look is wholesome. Generation Y, also known as the Millennials and Echo Boomers, values conformity, but their fashion trends can be so outrageous that many don't know how to dress appropriately for work. Seminar attendees constantly ask me about young women with their "jelly bellies" hanging out for the world to see. This is a result of Generation Y being raised to include everyone and accept everything, so they let it all hang out - literally. They haven't learned that they have to accommodate the employer, not the other way around. They're accustomed to society, including over-indulgent parents, accommodating them. By defining a dress code, you're bringing uniformity to as many as four generations who all have to adapt to the same standard long enough to earn a paycheck. This also sends the message that you're the boss.

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