Talking About Hygiene Concerns in the Workplace



Pungent body odour, unwashed clothing, dirty fingernails, or unkempt hair are not only an unwelcome distraction in the workplace, but they may also negatively impact morale and productivity. Personal hygiene is an uncomfortable topic to discuss with an employee, but if it is causing a disruption, the subject needs to be addressed.

Personal Hygiene Challenges

Poor hygiene is a business issue. However, seeing the employee as a person first is key to managing the situation. Before you address the issue with your employee, consider the underlying situation:

1. ***Cultural or personal differences:*** Different cultures/people prepare and consume different foods, have different habits, or use different oil or scents. It can be difficult to discern hygiene issues versus individual differences.
2. ***Means such as cost, time or access:*** As a result of financial or personal challenges, an employee may not have regular access to clean clothing, hygiene products or the ability to perform daily hygiene activities.
3. ***Physical and mental health concerns:*** Some individuals struggle as both a result and a symptom of physical and mental health issues.
4. ***Willful defiance:*** Defiance usually indicates there are other issues that need to be addressed.

If health and safety are concerns, it can be useful to focus on providing further education and training even before raising the concern. Remind your employees of policies and providing specific examples of appropriate practices – it's a good way to educate your entire office about hygiene and dress code requirements without singling out and potentially embarrassing an individual employee.

5 Steps to Take When Approaching an Employee with Personal Hygiene Issues

1. Consider the role that your employee's cultural background, financial means, health, or defiance plays in the situation. This will help you better position yourself to identify solutions.
2. Ask questions to determine the employee's awareness of the situation and/or underlying issues.
3. Focus on being considerate, helpful, and informative. Do not be punitive or condescending.

4. Speak to the employee honestly – but sensitively – about your concerns.
5. Offer suggestions for making changes.

Scripts For Discussing Hygiene with a Member of your Workforce

1. **Opening the Conversation.** *'Hi Susan I want to talk to you about some concerns that have arisen of which you may not be aware. I would like to talk to you in private for a few minutes."*
2. **Expressing Concern.** *'I wonder if you have been having any challenges at home or at work that have affected how well you have been able to take of yourself?'*
3. **Getting to the Problem.** *'Recently it has been brought to my attention that your personal appearance (or the quality of your clothing) has lead to concerns about how you are doing. These concern seem to be impacting your ability to do your job (or how others view your abilities)."*
4. **Offering solutions**. *"You are a valued member of our organization and I would like to work with you to improve this situation . . . . '*

For reasons both within and beyond their control, certain individuals will struggle with self-care. Sometimes offering awareness tempered with kindness and support can be enough to spur someone to action. However underlying concerns may limit an individual's ability to address the situation and direct intervention may be required.

Assuming that your employee is not aware of the situation, or is not in a position to manage the situation, can help you approach them from a place of concern and not distaste. This may facilitate a better resolution than taking a punitive approach, benefiting everyone and maintaining good working relationships.