

You Really Can't Wear That



By Tara Orchard

There may come a time when you must address the issue of inappropriate workplace attire with an employee. Rarely is it a comfortable conversation. However, before you begin the conversation there are a few things you should keep in mind that may just make the conversation a little more comfortable.

Before you begin ensure there really is a legitimate concern. Clothing choices are subjective. If the problem is a health or safety concern that is a clear cause for concern. However, if it is not you need to clearly define the issue.

Clarify the Concern

It can often be useful to classify your concerns under one of the following categories:

- poor condition or ill fitting clothing
- inappropriate or unsafe clothing for job related tasks or activities
- clothing that falls outside of appropriate workplace attire for your organization and/or for the a specific role but is acceptable in the general community
- clothing that is offensive or provocative by general standards for your organization, clients/customers or local community.

Once you have determined the exact nature of the concern and are comfortable that the concern is sound you are ready to proceed.

5 Steps to Beginning the Conversation about Appropriate Workplace Attire

1) When possible do not single one person out. Do you already have a policy in place? If you do not begin by creating a very simple or informal one as a way to begin the conversation. If you already have a policy determine if it could be updated or, if the policy is not in need of updating identify or create an opportunity to remind everyone of the policy, perhaps a change of seasons or a change in the workplace, for example new staff, a change in clientele or introducing a new service can be a useful opportunity to review policies.

Once you open the conversation let everyone know that in a few days time you will be checking to ensure everyone understands and is following the policy. By doing this

you create a natural opportunity to approach a specific individual for a follow-up conversation if necessary.

2) Avoid making it personal. Remember to clarify the reason behind your clothing policies by focusing on the functions in the workplace. This will allow you to have a conversation about work and not about individual personal preferences. Focus on the 'what' and the 'why' and not the 'who'.

Before you proceed ask yourself if there an underlying issue tied to a lack of awareness about workplace attire guidelines or an issue associated with cultural, religious, gender, size or generational differences.

3) Treat the person with respect – When it is time to speak to an individual begin from a place of respect and collaboration. Take the time to think about what may be underlying the persons failure to understand or follow the dress code. Perhaps the person does not have the financial resources for appropriate clothing, has recently lost or gained weight, is a very busy mother or has recently experienced a personal crisis. These are not excuses, but reasons that allow you to see the situation differently. Seeing from others perspective is a key component of emotional intelligence, something very useful in a situation such as this.

4) Make it a conversation not a lesson. Begin the conversation casually by asking if the person has any questions about attire. Identify something positive and ensure you include this information; perhaps you personally like their attire, the colour, style, fit or find something else to compliment, even if it is related their punctuality, hard work or how well liked they are.

If they respond by asking if there is a problem with their attire ask if have ever wondered if their attire was always consistent with expectations for their role or the current workplace. If they say they are not certain this offers you a window for a conversation.

If they respond with defensiveness and ask you to explain what you mean you may say there have been a few times when it seems their attire may have been a distraction in the workplace. Do not make a judgment statement by saying their attire was to revealing or to casual or not clean. By focusing on activities of the job you are framing the conversation on work and not general personal preferences. If they become defensive at this point stay calm and do not react. Let them talk and listen to what they are saying you may find clues that will help you address the situation successfully over the next few days.

5) Focus on positive resolutions – If you do not gain agreement in the first conversation ask the person if he would consider seeing the situation from your perspective and if you could meet again in a day or two to continue the conversation. If you can get agreement that he will think about it further or meet again that is a great result. Change often results from awareness and by being given an opportunity to make the decision to change. Unless the problem is a safety concern allow the person to think about and decide to make a change if at all possible.

When we gain more awareness we have the opportunity to understand what we need to do differently. By listening to another persons perspective and sharing yours you create the opportunity to find agreement not through discomfort but by respecting others viewpoints. In the end you may both find a common middle ground that creates a successful resolution and a happy employee.

See also:

[Dress Codes & Personal Grooming Policies-How Far Can They Go?](#)

[Who Decides What Your Employees Should Wear?](#)

Use this [Summer Dress Code Policy](#) to set standards for warmer weather wear in your office.