

The “Your Mother Doesn’t Live Here” dirty-dishes problem

Question: We have a small break room where used personal dishes sit in the sink for days ... even a week or more. Signs have been posted, but still people ignore it and leave their bowls, spoons, cups, etc.

I've collected the dirty dishes in times past and put them into an empty box with a label affixed on top, "Dirty Dishes." But, the trash people picked it up and threw it away. Anyone have other solutions? - *Marilee Crowell*

Comments

If the dishes get thrown out, people will be more attentive next time. I have the same issue with people leaving things in the refrigerator. Every Friday I advise that anything left in the frig will get thrown out. I've thrown out Tupperware dishes twice - it was amazing how now people clean out their stuff. Threw out 2 coffee cups yesterday. Dishes are not my job!

Posted by: Tina | July 13, 2007 at 12:56 PM

Our policy is if it is left in the sink it goes in the Trash. Period!

Posted by: Christine Sorensen | July 13, 2007 at 12:57 PM

At my office, when people leave dirty dishes in the sink overnight, we throw them away the next morning. We don't intend to be their housekeepers. We don't have a problem with dirty dishes anymore. I guess people finally go the hint.

Posted by: Christine | July 13, 2007 at 12:58 PM

I'm interested in the comments about this. I have the same problem at my office ... and all anyone has to do is get rid of what is in the dish and put it in the dishwasher. The dishwasher and our cleaning lady take care of the rest!

One problem we have is I can't put a sign up saying something like "Your Mother doesn't live here; clean up after yourself" because our kitchen is right off our main conference room and guests are in and out of there quite often.

So, please, if there is any way to know the answer to your dilemma, I'd like to know!

Posted by: Selena | July 13, 2007 at 12:59 PM

In our office we informed everyone that uses the break room that if dishes are left in the sink over night they will be thrown away. It only took throwing stuff away a couple of times for it to be taken serious.

Posted by: Melissa | July 13, 2007 at 01:02 PM

My suggestion would be to remove all silverware and other non-perishable dishes from company cabinets. Just use plastic and paper goods. If employees bring in their own stuff and leave it dirty in the sink, throw it out. A nice sign over the sink letting everyone know dirty items left in sink are trashed at close of business would be appropriate.

Posted by: Karen Kosmoski | July 13, 2007 at 01:02 PM

We had that problem for a short while because the signs were not followed-up with consequences. Because of the rising risk of bugs, etc. (not to mention the smell), we would leave the dishes for two days and then discard them (not by anyone in particular.) Unfortunately, it doesn't create fans but for health reasons, something has to be done.

Posted by: Anita T. | July 13, 2007 at 01:02 PM

We have a rotating "Kitchen Duty" list, posted on our refrigerator. Each week, a different employee is responsible for making sure the counters are wiped down, the dishwasher is run, and the break room is tidy. Our CEO is included on the list, and makes it a point to be seen in the kitchen wiping up messes when they happen, in order to set the best possible example.

We do have individuals who travel, and they're responsible for switching out if they happen to be traveling during their kitchen week. The executive assistant and I also make it clear we're glad to help if asked.

If the kitchen is dirty or messy, it's easy to see who dropped the ball, and that person can be held accountable. It's certainly not the best scenario for every office, but it works fairly well for ours.

Posted by: Kelly | July 13, 2007 at 01:02 PM

We had the exact same problem, so we posted a notice on neon orange paper (laminated it) and taped it to the cabinet door above the sink:

"ABSOLUTELY NO DISHES ARE TO BE LEFT IN SINK/COUNTER AT ANY TIME. DISHES LEFT IN SINK/COUNTER WILL BE DISCARDED."

It worked. Everyone is washing and drying their dirty dishes immediately and taking them with them. The breakroom looks great now. If anyone does leaves their dirty dish in the sink, it gets tossed in the garbage.

We also posted a laminated neon orange sign on our two refrigerators:

"REFRIGERATOR ETIQUETTE

- LABEL ALL ITEMS WITH YOUR NAME AND DATE.
- DO NOT TAKE ANY FOOD/CONDIMENTS THAT DO NOT BELONG TO YOU.
- WIPE UP ALL SPILLS.

IMPORTANT

THESE REFRIGERATORS ARE CLEANED OUT EVERY FRIDAY AT 4:00 PM.

ITEMS NOT LABELED WITH YOUR NAME/DATE OR PAST THEIR EXPIRATION DATE WILL BE DISCARDED."

On Friday afternoon two of us go thru the refrigerators and toss out any expired and not labeled items.

Posted by: Gayle | July 13, 2007 at 01:03 PM

We have one person who consistently does not wash his own dishes. We put them back on his desk when he's away. He has his own office, so the smell and dirt doesn't bother the rest of us, and it keeps his dirty dishes out of our clean lunchroom. When he gets tired of looking at his own dirty dishes, he'll take them home.

Posted by: Dawn E. | July 13, 2007 at 01:06 PM

Two suggestions:

1) When our offices were in an annex building from the main building, we had a "Rubber Glove Award" folder. A list of employee names (full time, part time, support staff, administrative staff, I mean everyone) were stapled to the inside front cover of the folder. Also in the folder was a supply list. For a one week period, one person was responsible for the cleaning and supply ordering for the area. When their week was completed, they checked their name and the week of responsibility. Once the folder had been "awarded" to each employee, a new list was attached and it started over again. Some people would tag-team and keep the folder for two weeks.

2) Our current policy has maintenance tossing all bowls left in the refrigerator and/or counters each Friday evening. After forgetting a dish once, people never forget again.

Hope these help.

Posted by: MB | July 13, 2007 at 01:07 PM

We have a similar problem, but it is with a refrigerator. Post a sign that says, "All dirty dishes will be discarded on Friday of each week." Let people know the date this new rule will be implemented. Then stick to it. Most people will not want to see their items thrown out.

Posted by: Karen Shultz CPS | July 13, 2007 at 01:08 PM

If there is a dishwasher, have folks put their dirty dishes in it after use & run it nightly.

If there isn't one, go to disposable cups/plates/utensils.

I was gratified to see that only one respondent (thus far) mentioned having folks assigned to kitchen duty - how loathesome. Each individual must take responsibility for their own food & containers & if they fail to do so - TRASH IT.

Posted by: Dishwasher or Paper/Plastic | July 13, 2007 at 01:09 PM

I think your company should invest in disposable plates, cups and utensils. This has worked very well for us. However we do have glasses, mugs and china but those are only used when we have important clients or visitors, I make sure to wash them and put them away after the visitors leave so no one gets the wrong idea that they are for everyone's use. Some of our staff have their own coffee mugs but they are very good about washing them and that includes the VP of the division! Maybe it would be a good idea to send out an email with your concerns and letting everyone know that if there is anything left in the sink it will be discarded, this way no one can say they did not know about the policy on dirty dishes. Good luck!

Posted by: Lissette | July 13, 2007 at 01:12 PM

We tried everything and leaving overnight and throwing them away is what we do now. We also throw away food containers left in the fridge to rot at the end of the week. If you want it to stay you have to put an expiration date. People improved but never will they completely :)

Posted by: Jocelyn | July 13, 2007 at 01:18 PM

We also assign employees to "kitchen duty" on a rotating (weekly) basis. Because we have 70 people in this building, no one has to do it more than once a year. Employees are expected to put their dishes in the dishwasher themselves, but for those few people who leave them in the sink, we take turns cleaning the kitchen, wiping down the tables, etc. Most employees who eat lunch in the kitchen are good about reminding each other to put their dishes in the dishwasher, if they see someone leave something in the sink -- we're sort of "self-policing."

Most of the items left in our sink are the ceramic dishes, drinking glasses, and silverware owned by the company, so it wouldn't work to throw those things out if left in the sink!

Regarding using paper plates, napkins, etc. for daily use - we don't do that, because it's not good for the environment. We try to be environmentally-friendly (recycle paper, toner cartridges, turning off lights in rooms not being used, etc.) whenever possible to cut down what goes into the landfills and save energy.

Posted by: | July 13, 2007 at 01:51 PM

We used to have a problem with our break room and the refrigerator until we set the rules. The refrigerator and breakroom are now cleaned every Friday afternoon. If you put food in the fridge that does not have your name on it, it is community property. Anything left in the fridge on Friday afternoon gets tossed.

Posted by: Nancy | July 13, 2007 at 01:56 PM

Do what our Boss did and threaten to take away the break room and make a storage closet out of it? So far, it has worked.
Good Luck.

Posted by: Victoria Grady | July 13, 2007 at 02:15 PM

Very Simple...On Friday any dishes or containers (with or without food in them) left on the counter, in the sink or in the fridge are thrown out. We have over 200 employees and no one here has time to be anyone else's "Mother".

Posted by: Jackie F | July 13, 2007 at 03:38 PM

Why not just have the cleaning people toss any dirty dishes found in the sink at the close of work each day? Say it and mean it.... these are supposedly adults.

Posted by: Nancy | July 13, 2007 at 04:23 PM

We also had the same problem, guess it's not uncommon. Two years ago before the start of the new year our HR Director made up a "kitchen duty list" by departments. Depending on how many employees are in each department determines how many months you are assigned. 20 employees, 3 months, 4 employees 1 month and so on. The individual departments pick their own partners as 2 people take the duty each week. On Friday's after lunch an email goes out reminding everyone of the purging of the fridge. Label it or lose it. In the beginning we had a couple casualties of personal containers being tossed because no one took us serious. It only happened once and ever since the kitchen policy has worked very well. We all look forward to the email on Friday as the employees try to out do each other with how they inform us of the cleaning of the kitchen.

Posted by: Elly | July 16, 2007 at 03:25 PM

Our company has a policy that anything left in the refrigerator by Friday afternoon (3 p.m. during the summer, 5 p.m. during the remainder of the year), everything gets tossed. We tend to use the same policy toward dishes, too.

Posted by: Diane Johnson-Hung | July 16, 2007 at 03:37 PM

My biggest offender is the owner of the company and he feels he is entitled. I made that part of the cleaning crews job each nite while works well. Additionally, when I hired the new receptionist, I also made her responsible for the kitchen. If the stuff looks bad during the day and we are expecting company, she has to go and clean.

Posted by: charlaf | July 16, 2007 at 04:29 PM

I feel fortunate to work for a company that provides me with a kitchen in which to enjoy my lunch. So if I see some things left in the sink I put them in the dishwasher. Period. People are not going to change their habits (good or bad) so why fight it?

Posted by: Amy Lee | July 20, 2007 at 03:11 PM

It's simple. Paper products. Get rid of all porcelain dishes.

Or if you find the dishes appearing, Send a memo to everyone saying, if there are dishes in the sink on Fridays at 3:30pm, they will be discarded. It's plain and simple. Dirty dishes attract rodents, bugs and mold. So it's a HEALTH issue. Don't be afraid of throwing things out.

I do that with refrigerator items. I send all a memo telling them that I will be tossing any containers, from the fridge on a certain date if they are not taken. After a few weeks of tossing many items, the fridge began to be empty by the time I got there on Friday afternoons.

Posted by: Sandra | July 20, 2007 at 03:34 PM

My problem is similar, but with a twist. Our boss (very small staff) generously provides sodas and water for us. It is my job to make sure that the supplies are available, but that has turned into me having to also maintain the stock in the fridge; regardless of who drinks what. I am his exec. asst., and appreciate his generosity, so feel strongly that he shouldn't go into the fridge and have his favorite soda or chilled water all gone. There is one employee who drinks the same soda as him (at a rate of about 6/day!) but absolutely refuses to ever replace what she drinks, despite the reminders on the door. (She has those power issues - refrigerator stuff is beneath her.) I would really like to get these people to start acting like adults, but I am making no headway. (This is a staff that will go get another stapler from somewhere else in the office instead of putting new staples in the empty stapler!) Any thoughts? I am getting a bit sick of this, but am thinking it is just easier to roll over on this one than bother trying to make any headway with this group?!

Posted by: Mary Beth | July 23, 2007 at 03:54 PM

Mary Beth - you have way too much time on your hands if you're thinking about how to make people act like adults: Get your boss his own personal small fridge for you to stock, & leave his generosity stacked next to the EEs' fridge.

Posted by: CC, HR for SmBz | July 27, 2007 at 02:50 PM

I have a similar problem in my office. People tend to leave things in the refrigerator. This often results in the creation of many "science projects". I decided to change my approach. I removed all the negative signs in the kitchen with the exception of the sign posted on the refrigerator reminding everyone clean out is on Friday afternoons. The policy is simple put your name on your stuff & remove by Friday, or it will be thrown away. I purchase brand new dish towels & always make sure the kitchen is clean when everyone arrives. This sets the tone for everyone. I stopped complaining and leaving nasty messages. My IT guy printed funny comics - mostly Dilbert. I notice as people are pouring their coffee they are reading the comics & often remember to wipe up their mess. This method seems to be working. There are still a few people that leave spilled sugar on the counter or lunch in the fridge, but most people do not want their containers, bags & food thrown away. They also don't want nasty messages all the time. Makes them want to leave a mess just to see what you will do.????

Posted by: Rondallyn McKinie | July 30, 2007 at 09:44 AM