

Inappropriate office attire

Question: I have a co-worker who wears trashy clothing to work almost every day. Even when she tries her hardest to dress professionally, she still looks horrible because her skirts are too short, her pants are too tight, and most of her shirts show her tattoos.

We work with mostly men, and they all make fun of her behind her back, calling her names and ridiculing her.

Her boss has addressed this issue but it hasn't seemed to help. I have a pretty decent relationship with her, and everyone in the office knows me as the woman who tells it like it is. Should I tell her she is committing career suicide by dressing the way she does?

Please help. -- Mandy

Comments

I would (delicately) tell her that her work apparel is not appropriate. Possibly make a few recommendations and offer to go shopping with her.

Posted by: Ann Harris | April 07, 2006 at 09:41 AM

If you have a decent working relationship with her why don't you take her under your wing maybe suggest a Saturday lunch and shopping for some professional attire that is more appropriate for the office. Sometimes people truly don't know how to dress professionally and need some assistance. Your co-worker outfits may seem totally appropriate to her and unless someone is willing to show her differently in a non confrontational and/or demeaning manner she will probably appreciate the help. I would also suggest contacting or have her contact the local workforce commissions and colleges since most offer seminars on how to dress for success.

Posted by: Jo | April 07, 2006 at 09:43 AM

If you have a decent relationship with her, why don't you give her a few pointers on what not to wear at the office, as well as maybe taking her on a shopping trip. She may not be a role model to follow in this area away from work. I feel she would really appreciate the effort.

Posted by: Virginia | April 07, 2006 at 09:44 AM

You've mentioned your co-worker's boss has addressed this issue. This seems to be an issue between your co-worker and her boss.

Only consider addressing this issue if it affects you. Even then, this is something that should be discreet between you and your co-worker. In this conversation, explain how it affects you. Often times, "telling it like it is" only puts the other person on the defensive.

Posted by: Anon | April 07, 2006 at 09:48 AM

I think since you have been recognized as being outspoken - use it. The next time those guys are having such a "fun" time at her expense, let them know that they are more than welcome to put their money where their mouths are and give generously to the new "clothes fund" for this young lady since they are so preoccupied with what she is wearing rather than the job she is doing.

Posted by: Lana | April 07, 2006 at 09:55 AM

The solution to the poorly dressed co-worker is likely to become a real project for you. It will take some instruction to take her from her present mode of dress to something appropriate, and so you will likely be doing what the others have suggested, taking on the mentor role. This instruction may or may not be appreciated. It takes time to teach people how to change a habit of dress. Or, you can write to the Learning Channel's "What Not To Wear" and nominate her for a complete make-over and let THEM handle the instruction for her body type and lifestyle, plus \$5000 in new clothes:

<http://tlc.discovery.com/fansites/whatnottowear/geton/geton.html>

Posted by: Kathy | April 07, 2006 at 09:58 AM

If this co-worker has received feedback from her boss and has not changed her style of dress, clearly your input will matter even less. Implement a dress code for the office and when she comes to work dressed inappropriately, she should be forced to go home and change on her own dime (not paid for time away from office). I can't imagine that would happen more than once or twice, once she sees her paycheck docked for the time it takes her to go home and change.

Posted by: | April 07, 2006 at 10:09 AM

Have you ever thought that maybe the girl doesn't care what others have to say about her, even if it is behind her back? You can be the lady who "tells it like it is" but I'm sure you know there is always a tactful way to talk to someone.

Do you consider her showing her tattoos trashy or is it the revealing clothing that is really the issue? I am very tattooed myself and although I don't show them off it's my personal choice.

I think if she considers you a good friend it may not hurt to mention that some items of clothing are more appropriate for work. I think some people don't know any better and if you think she trusts you enough that you can talk to her than give it a shot, but always remember that every action has a consequence and she may not react to you in a manner you expect.

Posted by: tattooed girl | April 07, 2006 at 10:26 AM

We have had this problem at our office, mostly with our younger employees. They grew up in a time when low-rise pants were the standard, and this has caused some problems. (When they bent over to get something out of a low cabinet, their "undergarments" were showing - not a good look in front of our customers!)

Here's what we did: We took our company dress code and made it very specific, including listing out what is NOT appropriate. Here's what our policy says:

"Obviously, every clothing style and combination that may be worn has not been anticipated. Questions about whether attire is appropriate should be directed to your supervisor. However, it can be stated that the following items do not portray a professional image and should NOT be worn to work:

Casual denim items (regardless of color), pants or skirts styled as jeans, cargo pants, Capri or cropped pants; active/sporting wear; midriff baring or low cut tops; casual sandals and athletic shoes; mini skirts or casual shorts. In addition, wrinkled, tight fitting, soiled, revealing and damaged clothing is unacceptable."

If any employee wears inappropriate clothing to work, their supervisor has the right to send them home to change (this time is NOT paid time, so it is quite an incentive!).

We also had a "fashion show" along the lines of the TV show "What Not To Wear." We had employees model both appropriate and inappropriate outfits, and had a commentator point out what was good (and bad) about each outfit. We even enlisted an employee to "demonstrate" the low-rise pants problem (this was very effective). She was one of the employees who had been inadvertently "flashing" her undergarments previously when loading paper in the copier, and told me honestly that she didn't realize what was revealed when that occurred. She said she had wished someone had told her sooner.

I certainly think it's worth addressing. I think the more specific you are, the better the chance of making a change.

Posted by: Lisa | April 07, 2006 at 11:34 AM

We had a situation like this in our office. After trying subtle hints and frank talks my boss decided to fund a shopping trip for this person. Another co-worker and myself took her shopping and bought her several new outfits. Her new look worked for a while then she started bringing some of her 'old favorites' back into play.

She said that she felt much more comfortable in her 'real' clothes and very uncomfortable in her 'dress up' clothes.

She decided that maybe she was more suited to a work environment that wasn't quite so corporate and left the company.

Posted by: | April 07, 2006 at 12:07 PM

Peoples choice of dress is a delicate situation for anyone. The person is obviously choosing these clothes for themselves and I am assuming since she is still employed that they are within dress code regulations. If there are no dress code regulations then maybe that is a suggestion to make to your supervisor. Even small regulations like; no tongue rings, no visible tattoos, skirt length, no cleavage, etc. Also if this employee does show up to work wearing something that you approve of make sure she knows, tell her how nice she looks, how professional she looks etc. Boost her self-esteem while she is wearing appropriate wear, she might want to wear more because of the positive feedback.

Posted by: Jocelyn | April 07, 2006 at 12:55 PM

If your office budget allows, invite an image consultant to speak to the support staff. Perhaps you can do this over lunch in conjunction with Administrative Professionals Day. I think this is something everyone would enjoy, and your co-worker won't feel singled out. Also, there are web newsletters that emphasize professional image. www.dressingwell.com is one I really enjoy and learn a lot from.

Posted by: Marilyn | April 07, 2006 at 01:03 PM

Several thoughts/suggestions here for Ms. Outspoken to deal with.

First, the men who laugh behind her back & call her names. If she ever finds out about this or overhears them, it could be grounds for a harassment/hostile workplace lawsuit. If you overhear this stuff and do nothing about it, you could be in trouble yourself. So, the men should be instructed to keep their laughter & thoughts to themselves.

Second, there must be some reason why this person wears "trashy" clothes to work. Ms. Outspoken should try to find out why without being too critical, along the lines of "what kind of image are you trying to project? Maybe you could get the "What Not To Wear" book for her & of course, refer her to the website(s) mentioned by others. Third, if there is going to be a dress code for the office, everybody should have input. And if this person deals with outside customers, it is very important to wear appropriate clothing because employee appearance is directly related to the company's business "image".

I like the idea of image consultant, but for the whole office, not just female support staff. I bet the men could use some professional advice themselves, even though they don't think so. In the 1970s and beyond, John Malloy made a fortune with his "Dress for Success" and "Dress for Women's Success" books and seminars. Be careful about funding a shopping trip for this person. She might feel insulted, but if you decide to do it, maybe it should be a "door prize" as part of the image consultant, even though you and others in the office are providing the funds.

Posted by: Anonymous | April 07, 2006 at 01:26 PM

Why not nominate her for The Learning Channel's "What Not to Wear"? Stacey and Clinton would give her a make-over and \$5000 of new clothes. At least, ask her to watch the show with you -- she might learn something!

Posted by: turquoise lady | April 07, 2006 at 02:13 PM

I think some of these complaints are a bit vague. Her skirts are too short? What exactly is too short? Knee length, just above the knee, or 6-inches above the knee? I think just above the knee is acceptable but many people may feel that is too short. What about her pants are too tight? If someone is overweight and their pants are too tight is that a dress code issue or is she being singled out? It sounds like you do not want to see tattoos at all and that is pretty clear but everything else seems a bit vague.

Posted by: Charlana | April 07, 2006 at 02:51 PM

If her boss has already addressed the issue with her, I would suggest you leave it between her and her boss. If your company does not have a dress code, perhaps you could help your boss develop one. Then, instead of

singling her out, during a meeting the boss could explain the existing dress code or introduce the new one to everyone at the same time.

I would only address it with her directly if you have a very friendly relationship with her. Clothing is a very personal choice, so most people are apt to be defensive, no matter how it is brought up or by whom.

Posted by: | April 07, 2006 at 06:00 PM

Perhaps some friendly conversation could disclose reasons why this person dresses as she does. Is it home environment? Is it because she wants to? Is it because she doesn't have resources, or doesn't care? Then you will know if there's any hope of changing her dressing habits, and if it would be appreciated or not. Join her on break with a magazine or catalogue under your arm and steer the conversation toward what you like and why. She is bound to give some insight in to the reasons for her clothing choices.

Posted by: MAL | April 12, 2006 at 04:36 PM

I believe the best thing is to have a company dress code (in writing.) In our office we got the company to pay for executive uniforms every couple of years. They gave us 2 blazers, 2 pants, 1 skirt (or 3 pants for those who don't like skirts) and 3 blouses! It has been so much easier to enforce the dress code since the company supplies the uniforms, which represents less cost in clothing for us, plus it eliminates the hassle of figuring out what to wear every day. Not to mention the best benefit for the company: a very impressive, elegant executive image!

Posted by: N Rivera | April 21, 2006 at 09:17 AM

You've mentioned your co-worker's boss has addressed this issue. This seems to be an issue between your co-worker and her boss.

Mind your own business OR tell her what you think to her face.

Posted by: Enjoys tattoos | April 29, 2006 at 01:03 PM

The first part of my comment is to "Enjoys Tattoos". My mother always taught me, "If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all". Professionals come here for advice from other Professionals. Meaningful, helpful advice. I do not believe the chance of having someone respond with such rudeness was in any way a draw for this forum.

Secondly, there could be any number of reasons why this girl may dress the way she does, from financial reasons to a possible lack of understanding what constitutes "Business Casual" or "Business Professional". In all likelihood this girl knows that she is being talked about, has seen looks or heard whispers, but does not know why. I do know that if it were me, I would want to know that my skirts were too short, or that my attire was inappropriate.

Is this girl committing career suicide by dressing the way she does? Yes. Regardless of how far women have progressed in the business world, can you think of any woman that would get promoted if she was the butt of office jokes and whispers? If you work at the Broken Spoke Saloon in Sturgis, its perfectly acceptable to have

your tattoo's showing and wear short skirts and the only thing that would raise an eyebrow is if you have none. However, if you work for Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, a prominent law firm in New York, you can kiss any chance of promotion goodbye.

Working in an office with mostly men, the women should stick together that much more. Obviously this girl and "Mandy" are not really friendly or this would not have happened to begin with. My co-workers and I are close enough that we can tell each other, "Hey, you have some pepper in your teeth." Imagine discovering your pants are unzipped after you've just had a 20 minute conversation with the General Manager is a confidence killer, not to mention completely embarrassing.

Like I said, if it were me, I'd like to know.

Posted by: Cat | May 05, 2006 at 02:44 PM