

Wash Your Hands Of Employee Hygiene Issues

Address the problem in a timely fashion. Otherwise, the employee's co-workers might take it upon themselves to do so in an unkind manner — and if they tie the hygiene problem to a protected characteristic like race, religion, or national origin, this could spark a hostile environment claim. Employees should already be on notice that they are expected to treat co-workers with respect, no matter what.

However, timely doesn't always mean meeting with the employee immediately. Sometimes, waiting until the end of the workday or shift should be considered. For example, if it is not possible for the employee to go home and shower or otherwise remedy the problem, the employee may become terribly self-conscious, which could affect productivity.

Deal with the issue privately. Managers who want to avoid a one-on-one confrontation may, instead, call a department meeting to issue a hygiene directive to the whole group. However, if the offender doesn't realize he/she is the one with the problem, the message will go unheeded. (Plus, if co-workers weren't previously aware of the problem, they will be now!)

Express the issue as a business concern. To lessen the chance that the employee will go on the defensive, explain how the issue is affecting the workplace (e.g., customer complaints, health and safety violations).

Be specific. A vague message can too easily be misinterpreted. *Example:* "Good hygiene is needed to provide good service, so be sure you practice good hygiene habits on a daily basis." The employee with bad B.O. might interpret this message as a reminder to wash their hands after using the restroom — not a bad message, but not the intended one!

The following must be clearly communicated:

- the employer's hygiene standards;
- in what way the employee is failing to meet the standard;
- suggestions for how to meet the standard;

- a timeline for doing so (e.g., immediately, in the case of a sleeve-wiper; by the next workday, in the case of an infrequent bather); and
- the consequences for failing to do so.

Be supportive. The manager should ask if and how they can help the employee. If the employee needs an accommodation, this gives them the perfect opportunity to request it. The manager should not broach the subject of a medical condition first.

Acknowledging Cultural Differences

What if the employee in question is foreign-born, so they might not have a full understanding of the expected hygiene standards of an American workplace?

Marjorie Brody, an executive coach/speaker and CEO of BRODY Professional Development (Jenkintown, PA), said that an employer can have a conversation "around understanding the differences in cultures and the etiquette of different cultures." She suggested that the manager start by saying something like, "We need to have a conversation that's not easy for me. But, I'm not being fair to you if we don't have this conversation." Then, "the manager needs to explain to the employee that cultures may vary in terms of personal hygiene and workplace decorum."

It is most important to focus on what the company's hygiene standards are. Brody: "Explain in further detail what is acceptable. For example: 'If your nose is running, you use a tissue or handkerchief, not your sleeve.' 'We bathe or shower daily, use deodorant, and limit the use of cologne or perfume.' 'Be aware that different foods also may be seen as less appealing. For example, strong garlic, curries, etc., which are fine in some cultures, may be a bit more offensive and overpowering to your American co-workers.'"

Don't be afraid to bring up cultural differences for fear of a national origin discrimination charge. You may find that it is necessary in order to get the point across effectively. A national origin discrimination claim should not be a threat if all employees are held to the same hygiene standards, and the employees are treated respectfully.