

Employee's poor personal hygiene puts you in a difficult situation



Telling a person they have bad breath or body odor is difficult to do. Just having to tell them at all is difficult enough. That's why so many managers toss this employee problem HR's way. You need to toss it back to the managers and make them responsible for handling their own [employee problems](#).

Anyone who lands in this difficult situation can use these best practices to address an employee's personal hygiene problem tactfully and effectively, and minimize the employee's embarrassment.

- Quietly and discreetly call the employee away from his/her workstation because if co-workers complained about the hygiene problem, they'll know exactly why you're pulling the employee into the meeting.
- Hold the meeting before the employee goes home for the day because there's no sense in telling him/her first thing in the morning, causing him/her to feel self-conscious all day, especially if the employee can't go home to shower and change clothes, for example.
- Think about how you would want to be told about this problem. Role-play with a colleague or supervisor to practice.
- Empathize. Acknowledge that you understand this is difficult for the employee to hear, but you would be neglecting your duties as a manager to ignore it.
- Stick to the topic of work. Tell the employee about the negative effects on the work environment (e.g., lack of teamwork because co-workers avoid him/her). Don't try to guess why the employee has this problem.
- Don't give off the scent that the employee is guilty of wrongdoing or this is a disciplinary session. But be clear that the employee needs to take care of the problem.
- Give the employee a chance to respond, if he/she wants to. The employee may tell you the odor is a result of a medical, cultural, or religious issue. Showing you're willing to help is better than standing ground on a "change, or else" demand. Suggest that the employee visit a doctor or dentist, if they tell you that they already practice good hygiene habits. But if the employee denies there's a problem at all, you may have to get him/her to face facts, for example, by telling the employee that co-workers spray air freshener after he/she comes around.
- Set goals, a timeline, and consequences for not reaching those goals. You may require the employee to show immediate improvement, but a better tactic is to expect the employee to show he/she is taking steps toward improvement, such as by making a doctor's appointment. Follow through with the consequences if the employee fails to improve.
- Recognize that the employee might be embarrassed or upset, and end the conversation abruptly. If that does happen, just follow up with the employee in a few days to check whether he/she got the message and has taken steps toward improvement.

A manager's job is difficult enough without these disruptive situations — an employee's poor hygiene, resistance to change, or tardiness, among others — cropping up on a daily basis. More often than not, managers dodge or mismanage these situations because they are uncomfortable to handle. And sometimes they end up in your lap, as if they're any less difficult for you to handle.