



How to's

How to address poor personal hygiene at work

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Talking about an employee's poor personal hygiene is never an easy conversation, but you need to push through your discomfort for everyone's sake. Here's how.

Addressing an employee's poor personal hygiene – such as a strong body odour – can be downright uncomfortable.

Some people might have a tendency to ignore such issues in the hope that they go away. But knowing how to have these [difficult conversations](#) is critical, says Karen Gately, leadership and people management specialist and Founder of Corporate Dojo, because you don't want to let it get out of hand.

"I've seen people's colleagues leave cans of deodorant on their desks. That's a not-so-subtle way of alerting the person to the fact that there's an issue," she says.

“The worst I’ve seen is where people were talking about someone’s body odour in an email and that classic mistake happened when someone copied in the person they were talking about.

“I also saw another example of those conversations happening online and the person who was subject to the comments was standing behind the employee [who was having the conversation] and read it over their shoulder.”

These can be really humiliating moments, says Gately, but they can be avoided with HR’s intervention. Conversations about poor hygiene need to be managed with care, respect and discretion.

“Clearly you don’t want it addressed [in a nasty way], but at the same time, you also don’t want people having to endure an unpleasant atmosphere at work. So it becomes a necessary conversation.”

How should you go about it? Gately has some simple, helpful advice.

Consider yourself in service of others

Gately is often training employers about how to have difficult conversations at work and poor personal hygiene is the example she calls on the most.

“It’s the one conversation that most people are going to find difficult on some level. They either deal with it too harshly or don’t deal with it at all.”

Look beyond the awkwardness of the conversation, says Gately. You’re addressing it because it’s the fair thing to do for the employee and their colleagues. You don’t want them finding out in a cruel way, like returning from lunch to see a can of deodorant on their desk.

“Having this conversation is being in service to everybody. You’re going into the conversation to make sure they’re aware of the issue.”

“It’s kind of cold and de-personalising to just hit them with a policy. There’s a lack of courage; it’s like you’re trying to hide behind the policy and saying, ‘Here’s the rules. It’s not my fault.’” Karen Gately, Founder of Corporate Dojo

When it comes to actually having the conversation, it's all about how you frame it. Don't tip-toe around the issue; don't make a bigger deal of it than you need to; and don't let your discomfort dictate how you'll respond.

Start by framing it as a necessary conversation and then rip the BandAid off by saying something like, 'I'm going to have a difficult and slightly uncomfortable conversation with you.'

"You want to be compassionate and kind, but it's also about getting on with it. If you're their manager or an HR professional, there's a level of accountability to address the broader impact [of the hygiene issues]. So you're going to have to draw the person's attention to the fact that there is an issue and then ask them to take reasonable steps to resolve it."

Importantly, you want to try and minimise their embarrassment as much as you can. If the matter has been raised by their colleagues, keep this information to yourself, says Gately. Instead, focus on factual statements that you've noticed yourself.

"You could say, 'I need to draw your attention to the fact that you have a tendency towards having strong body odour. I need to make sure you're aware of that so we can take steps to address this.'

"You don't want to be saying, 'I've had complaints about...' as that's a whole other level of humiliation when they contemplate that it could be a broader conversation."

It's not always on HR

Getting pulled into HR's office to talk about poor personal hygiene would be mortifying for a lot of people, says Gately. So it won't always make sense for HR to take the lead in this conversation.

"If you're an HR person who works closely with a team, and you get an opportunity to pull that person aside and have a quiet, quick chat in a meeting room, then that's perfectly fine."

But if your only interaction with that person has been in an official capacity – such as onboarding them or facilitating performance reviews – an official meeting could amplify the issue unnecessarily.

In this case, HR professionals should see themselves as coaches, and facilitators of those conversations, which could be led by the person's line manager.

"As a manager, hopefully you'd have a healthy relationship with that person to be able to have that conversation."

Don't hide behind a policy

A lot of other articles on this topic talk about the importance of having a clear policy that outlines expectations for [dress code](#), personal hygiene, grooming and presentation in the workplace. And while Gately thinks these policies can be useful in setting up expectations, they shouldn't be used as a shield to hide behind.

“It’s kind of cold and de-personalising to just hit them with a policy. There’s a lack of courage; it’s like you’re trying to hide behind the policy and saying, ‘Here’s the rules. It’s not my fault that I’m telling you this.’ Just have a heart to heart with the person.”

If you’re trying to avoid having a difficult conversation with an individual by sending out a company-wide email reminding staff to adhere to the company’s hygiene standards, you’re probably not going to get the desired outcome.

“You can’t rely on self-awareness. People won’t read that email and go, ‘Oh, that’s me.’ Just go straight to them and have a conversation.”

“Having this conversation is being in service to everybody.” Karen Gately, Founder of Corporate Dojo

A company-wide approach would only be appropriate if there was a broader issue with a group of people, she says.

“You might have a workforce of people doing a very sweaty type of job, therefore body odour becomes an issue. Then you might want to send out a reminder to be polite to one another and take care of that kind of stuff, but that’s a communication that I would be driving through the line manager. It’s all context based, but I think [these conversations] should usually be a personalised approach at a team or personal level.”

Know when to dig deeper

What if you’ve had the difficult conversation and the person still isn’t holding up their end of the bargain?

“I’ve seen a scenario where someone didn’t actually care. They said, ‘I know I stink. People can deal with it.’ That’s not a fair, cooperative or team-spirited attitude. You don’t have a right to make people’s workplace experience unpleasant. It’s not professional or appropriate. So if someone was doing that, then ultimately you’d get into a misconduct scenario.”

Another aspect where HR professionals can add a lot of value in these conversations is knowing when to dig deeper. Have someone’s hygiene standards suddenly slipped? This could mean that they’re experiencing personal issues or mental health challenges.

In this instance, Gately says it’s important to know what follow up questions to ask – such as ‘Is everything okay at home?’ or ‘Are there things going on in your personal life that are affecting you right now?’

It could also be a sign that you need to look for other indicators of poor mental health, such as [performance issues](#), higher [absenteeism](#) rates, or signs of [poor sleep](#) or depression, as out-of-character hygiene issues are unlikely to be standalone issues.

"Sometimes there could be a medical issue behind it that you're not aware of," says Gately. Or an employee living with a physical disability or a temporary ailment may struggle to maintain their hygiene standards.

"If that's the reality, they might need carer's support to address that."

Ultimately, knowing how to handle difficult conversations well is a transferable skill that all HR managers should possess, says Gately. It can be applied to all manner of issues, such as poor performance, attendance issues, or attitude issues.

"Care enough to be of service, move past fear, have awkward conversations with confidence and then resolve the issue."