

Holy Mackerel! What Is That Smell?

Overview

Have you received complaints from employees about a smelly coworker? Whether it is perfume/cologne, body odor or bad breath, the "stinky" employee is a growing workplace problem. Read ahead to learn how to sensitively address this odorous situation.



The Situation

Have you ever received any of these complaints?

1. "John has really bad B.O. and his smell makes me sick. Can you please make him bathe?"
2. "I am allergic to Nicole's Chanel #5 perfume; it gives me migraines. Can you make her stop wearing it?"
3. "George must bathe in his cologne. It's simply too strong. Can you please make him tone it down?"
4. "Julia has the worst breath. It smells like a trash compactor. Can you please make her brush her teeth?"

How do you tactfully address these complaints?

No one wants to deal with body odor issues in the workplace, but when these issues do arise it is important to handle these complaints in a professional manner. The following tips will help you address this delicate issue with as much sensitivity as possible:

1. **Investigate.** As with any employee complaint, it is important to investigate a complaint about odor issues before talking to the "offending" employee. It is possible that the complaining employee is trying to cause problems for this employee. Try to spend time with the employee to see for yourself if there is a body odor.
2. **Don't delegate.** You may be tempted to have the employee talk to the "offender." Resist the temptation, as it will likely cause conflict within the workforce. Instead, address the issue personally with the employee.
3. **Keep it private.** You may believe it's easier to address the issue in a group meeting – issuing a friendly reminder about personal hygiene/perfumes/cologne to the entire team. This may only serve to "single out" the offender. Instead, meet with the employee privately to avoid embarrassment.
4. **Timing the meeting.** Consider scheduling the meeting at the end of the business day so the employee will not feel self-conscious for the entire workday.
5. **Be direct and tactful.** Acknowledge the awkwardness of the conversation and your desire not to offend the employee. Then identify the problem to the employee.

6. **Avoid finger-pointing.** Do not identify the employee(s) who complained about the body odor. Instead, tell the employee the problem as you perceive it. (e.g. "I have noticed that your cologne is a little strong and it might be distracting to others in the workplace).
7. **Don't pry.** Do not ask about the cause of the body odor. Instead, focus the conversation on how the problem can be solved.
8. **Collaborate.** After identifying the problem with the employee, attempt to work with the employee to find possible solutions.
9. **Don't procrastinate.** You may think the problem will resolve itself. This will only make the problem worse. Instead, address this issue in a timely manner.

Be Aware of Potential Red Flags

Remember the root cause of an employee's unpleasant body odor could be attributed to a protected reason. An employee's body odor/bad breath could stem from a medical condition, which may mean that the employee has a disability and is protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

If the employee mentions a medical condition, you will need to engage in the interactive process with the employee to discuss reasonable accommodations that can be made to address the problem. Possible accommodations may include:

- Providing the employee with a fan for his/her workspace;
- Allowing the employee to take periodic breaks during the workday to freshen up;
- Allowing the employee to work from home

Additionally, a complaining employee's assertion that he/she is allergic to someone's perfume/ cologne may mean that the complaining employee has a protected disability. In that case, you need to engage in the interactive process with the complaining employee and request that he/she provide medical certification regarding the allergy in order to determine the necessary accommodation.

Conclusion

Having this type of conversation with an employee is never easy. Keeping the discussion professional and tactful will help make an otherwise uncomfortable situation more bearable for both you and the employee.

In addition, developing a hygiene/grooming policy may help prevent these issues before they arise. Just remember that such policies must be consistently applied to all employees in your workplace.