



Unit 18

Resolving Hygiene issue at Workplace

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Resolve hygiene issues such as bad hair days, inappropriate piercings and body art, poor clothing choices, bad breath, body odor, excessive gas, and incontinence
- ✓ Nip poor hygiene habits in the bud
- ✓ Identify ways to encourage good hygiene at your workplace

Unit 18

Resolving Hygiene Issues at Workplaces

Bad Hair Days (And Weeks... and Months...)

Case Study

Mandy Manager is sitting at her desk one Monday morning when she sees her customer service supervisor, Sarah, stumble past. Sarah's hair is standing everywhere! It looks like she just got out of bed. What would you do next?

A Basic Formula

First, we'll think back to our general conversation framework:



Suggested Approach

Now, let's customize it for this situation.

Set the Time and Place

Mandy Manager walks over to Sarah's desk and quietly says, "Sarah, do you have a moment so that I can speak to you in private?"

Sarah nods and follows Mandy back to her office. Mandy closes the door and they both have a seat.

**Use a Soft Opener that Asks for Feedback**

Mandy Manager: “Sarah, I’m a little bit concerned about your appearance this morning. I’d like your help in addressing my concerns. This chat will be private – I won’t share anything here with anyone else without your permission – but I will put a note in your employee file summarizing what we discussed. Do you have a few minutes so that we can talk about this and come to a solution?” Sarah says, “Sure, that sounds fine.”

Describe the Issue as You or Others Have Observed It

Mandy Manager: “I noticed that your hair looks rather unkempt this morning – it’s definitely not your usual polished look!”

Describe the Impact on the Employee and the Workplace

Mandy Manager goes on to say: “I’m worried that clients might see our business in a negative light, particularly since we have a rigorous dress code.”

At this point, Sarah could take two basic approaches. Usually, you will get a response like this: “Mandy, I’m really sorry about my appearance today. I have had one of those mornings and just didn’t have time to prepare like I usually do. Is it OK if I take a few minutes to fix myself in the washroom?”

Mandy will agree, thank Sarah for her co-operation, and life can continue as normal. Mandy won’t need to outline any options as Sarah has solved the problem on her own.

Sarah, however, might say something like this: “Mandy, you’re so out of touch! This is totally the latest style. There’s no way I’m changing my hair – this took me hours!” Mandy then needs to move on to the final step.

Outline the Options

Mandy: “Sarah, I’m sorry that we see this issue differently. If you won’t change your hairstyle to something more conservative, then I will have to get the opinion of one of our human resource consultants. My recommendation to them will be that you take today off as a paid day to consider my request. If you want to continue working with us, you’ll have to change the way you do your hair. If you think that my request is unreasonable, I’ll accept that as your resignation. Either way, we can meet tomorrow morning to discuss this further. Does this plan sound acceptable to you?”

Dealing with Dandruff

Dandruff is another common personal hygiene issue. You might describe the issue and the impact like this: “Tom, I’ve got some feedback to share about your appearance. It’s a bit uncomfortable for me to say this, but I’d appreciate someone telling me, so I’ll say it straight out. I think you have a problem with dandruff. I’m worried that customers are turning away because of your appearance, and that’s not fair



because you're an excellent salesperson. Do you think that there is something that you could do to solve this problem?

Addressing Piercings and Body Artwork

You can deal with concerns about body piercings and artwork (such as tattoos) in a similar way.

Case Study

Stu Supervisor knocks on Andy Accountant's door to ask a question about weekly reports. Andy answers the door and begins speaking, but Stu doesn't hear what he's saying... he's too distracted by the chain connecting Andy's nose and left ear.

Solution

Set the Time and Place

When Stu regains his senses, he quietly says, "Andy, do you have a moment so that I can speak to you in private?"

Andy nods and ushers Stu back into his office. Stu closes the door and they both have a seat.

Use a Soft Opener that Asks for Feedback

Stu Supervisor: "Andy, I'm a little bit concerned about your recent fashion decision. I don't want to embarrass you but there are some questions I'd like to ask. This chat will be private – I won't share anything here with anyone else without your permission – but I will put a note in your employee file summarizing what we discussed. Do you have a few minutes so that we can talk about this and come to a solution?"

Andy says, "Sure, I'd be happy to help."

Describe the Issue as You or Others Have Observed It

Stu Supervisor: "You've obviously received a new piercing over the weekend."

Describe the Impact on the Employee and the Workplace

Stu Supervisor goes on to say: "You attend many meetings with our senior executives. Have you thought about how they might perceive your new look?"

At this point, Andy could take two basic approaches. In general, you will get a response like this: "Geez, Stu, I hadn't really thought about that. I've been saving up for this forever! I don't mind not wearing it to work, though. I can even take it out now if you like." Then, Stu will agree, thank Andy for his co-operation, and life can continue as normal. Stu won't need to outline any options as Andy has solved the problem on his own.



Andy, however, might say something like this: “I’m so tired of this company trying to run my life! It’s my face and I’ll do what I want with it.” Stu then needs to move on to the final step.

Outline the Options

Stu: “Andy, I’m sorry that we see this issue differently. If you won’t agree to remove the jewelry during working hours, then I will have to get the opinion of one of our human resource consultants. My recommendation to them will be that you take today off as a paid day to consider my request. If you want to continue working with us, you’ll have to take out the piercing during working hours. If you think that my request is unreasonable, I’ll accept that as your resignation. Either way, we can meet tomorrow morning to discuss this further. Does this plan sound acceptable to you?”

A Note about Body Art

In one sense, piercings are easy to deal with – they can easily be removed and although holes will still be visible, they will be less obtrusive than an inch-long post sticking through your receptionist’s lip. Tattoos aren’t as disguisable. The usual compromise is to wear clothing that covers the offending artwork.

Helping Employees Dress for Success

Plunging necklines, exposed buttocks, ripped clothing, and items that don’t even resemble clothing... these are all things that we (and we’re sure you) have seen in the workplace. Poor clothing choices can be simply that, or they can be caused by ignorance, lack of resources, poor personal hygiene, or a combination of these factors. In any situation, our guide for difficult conversations can help!

Dress Code Violations

If clothing is ripped, torn, or simply doesn’t meet dress code, follow the first two steps in the step-by-step guide: choose the right time and place and start with a soft opener (but don’t beat around the bush – there’s a fine line there!).

Next, say something like, “June, I don’t want to offend you, but I don’t think that your outfit today meets up to our dress code standards. There are tears in both pockets of your pants, and they are dragging on the floor. I’m worried that this might reflect negatively on the company since you deal with the public so frequently during the day. What do you think?”

In a perfect world, June might say something like, “I’m sorry Steve! I was in a rush this morning and grabbed the wrong pair of pants. If I can have an hour, I can go home and change. Would that solve the problem?”



Realistically, however, this is the scenario where you are most likely to encounter opposition. June might say something like, “Well, I thought that dress code policy was supposed to be revised at the beginning of the year? Besides, customers can’t see me from the waist down.”

If your feedback is challenged, put our backup plan in place: remove the employee from the public’s eye for the time being (if possible) and get a second opinion from the human resource team.

Special Scenarios

If the issue at hand involves inappropriate clothing, such as a plunging neckline or too-low trousers, we recommend that you ask a human resources representative (or at the very least, a supervisor of the same gender as the employee) to be present during the discussion. Make sure that you keep detailed notes of the time, date, and place; participants in the meeting; what was discussed; and what was decided, if anything.

Offering Resources

You may find that an employee isn’t meeting dress code because he or she simply doesn’t have the resources to do so. Have a list of non-profit groups and thrift shops on hand for occasions like these. Encourage the employee to contact the company’s human resource department or employee assistance program (if available). You can also encourage the company to organize a closet shopping day (where employees bring in items to swap) or to keep a clothing bank box in the lunchroom.

Bad Breath

Things like spicy food, pungent food, dry mouth, and forgetting to brush your teeth can all cause short-term bad breath. However, many people suffer from chronic bad breath – that is, all bad breath, all the time, not just after eating or first thing in the morning.

The best way to beat bad breath is to practice good dental hygiene: brush your tongue and teeth, floss, use a tongue scraper, and see the dentist regularly. If you can’t brush after meals, certain brands of gum can help get saliva flowing and clean out your mouth. What doesn’t work? Mouthwash, breath sprays, mints, and most brands of gum just cover the smell up and don’t address the underlying bacteria.

What’s the best way to deal with an employee who has bad breath? If it’s just a one-time thing and you have a good relationship with the employee, a simple offer of dentist-approved gum should solve the problem. However, if it’s a bigger issue (say, a group of colleagues have approached you about a particular individual), then it’s time to pull the employee aside and use our difficult-conversation framework.

You might say something like: “Stacey, thanks for taking a minute to talk to me. I wanted to talk to you privately about a sensitive issue that has come to my attention. If it were me, I’d appreciate someone



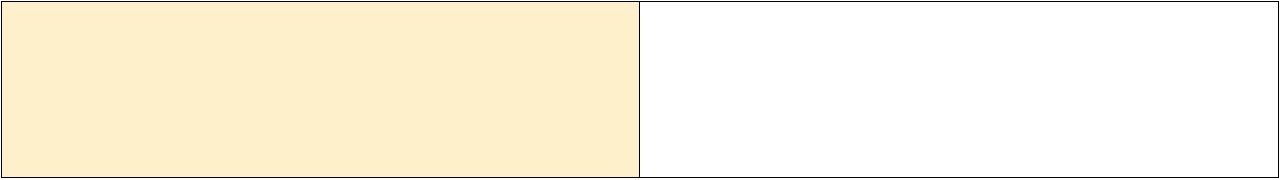
being straightforward, so I'll just say it right out: I think you might have a problem with bad breath. You're an excellent customer service representative and I wouldn't want this issue to affect customers' perception of you. There are a lot of people who have this problem, and I'd be more than happy to help in any way I can. Can you think of any solutions?"

Usually the employee will apologize and promise to deal with the issue by improving their personal hygiene or by altering their diet. We have never encountered a situation where an employee will argue with you – most people are far too embarrassed for that. (If you do encounter objections, however, you can handle them using the standard routine that we've already discussed.)

Body Odor

Think about some causes of body odor and how you would address each situation.

Issue	Solution



Gastrointestinal Issues

Case Study

I once worked for a successful, upscale advertising agency run by two business partners, Deke and Steve. One of their most successful, creative representatives was a gorgeous young woman named Gloria, who also had an uncanny knack for belching like a much larger person. Other employees in the office got a kick out of it, and clients rarely visited the site, so it didn't seem to be an issue. However, Deke and Steve felt that her behavior didn't quite fit their image of a professional office. So, they scheduled a private meeting with Gloria and politely asked her to tone it down. She agreed that she would try, but added that she had an untreatable medical condition that caused excessive gas and actually made it painful to hold it in. Deke and Steve felt that this was a reasonable compromise and that they now better understood the situation. Case closed.

Dealing with Flatulence

All of us have had to break wind (either north or south!) at some point in time. At home, it's often not as much of an issue, but untimely gas in the workplace can be terribly embarrassing. A simple, "Excuse me, I'm sorry about that," will usually suffice.

However, if you have an employee who constantly trumpets "God Save the Queen" out of one end or another, you need to address it. Not only does it affect your company's professional image, it certainly must be distracting for other co-workers.

Your conversation, of course, should start with setting the time and place. Then, you can start addressing the issue. If you have a good relationship with the co-worker and you feel that you can be light-hearted about the situation, you might say something like, "George, an issue has come up about your office etiquette. Personally, I get the fact that you need to let out some gas after lunch. We all do it! But, I think it's offending your co-workers. Do you think you could be a little bit more discreet about letting go in the office?"

A more serious approach might look like this: "George, a sensitive issue has come up about your office etiquette. I'm not sure if you're aware it or not, but you seem to have an excessive amount of gas. I'm worried that it's distracting those around you and making the office environment uncomfortable. Do you have any ideas on how we might solve this problem?"



Dealing with Incontinence

While flatulence can be funny, incontinence is certainly on the opposite end of the scale. There's nothing more embarrassing than having an accident at work... or having accidents on an ongoing basis.

With this in mind, tread carefully when bringing this up to an employee. You might start by saying something like, "Susan, a sensitive issue about your hygiene has come to my attention, and I'd like your help in solving it. This will be private and I promise to keep our conversation confidential. Do you have a few minutes so that I can share the problem with you?"

If Susan agrees, you could continue with, "Some of your co-workers have come to me out of concern for you. They have noticed an odor coming from your work area, and it is making it hard for them to focus on their work. They describe it as a strong urine smell, and they have noticed it several times over the past few weeks. Do you think that there is something that you could do to resolve this situation?"

Just as with body odor issues, if Susan says that the problem is related to a medical issue, put the conversation on pause and get your human resources department involved.

If Susan says that she is sure that the odor isn't coming from her work area, say something like, "Well, I appreciate your time and your honesty. This is a tough topic to handle and you've been really co-operative. I'll do some more investigating and let you know if I need any further help. Does that sound OK to you?"

Then, investigate the problem further. Ask employees who observed the problem for more information. If the observation is just a strange odor, you may want to check for pest infestations. If the problem persists and you're sure it's the employee, have the conversation again, and share the new information.

The other possible outcome is that the employee may have been the source of the problem, been too embarrassed to tell you, and resolved it on their own.

Bad Habits

Think about some bad habits. Consider how you would prevent and handle each situation.

Issue	Solution



Further Reading:

- ✓ *Falcone, Paul. 101 Tough Conversations to Have With Employees. AMACOM, 2009.*
- ✓ *Hamilton, Cheryl, and Cordell Parker. Communicating for Results (10th Edition). Wadsworth Publishing, 2013.*
- ✓ *Kemp, Sid. Perfect Solutions for Difficult Employee Situations. McGraw-Hill, 2004.*