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How to tell someone, 'You smell' ^[1]

Alice,

I have an employee who is my top performer and I as well as his co-workers have commented to each other about this person's body odor. Granted, we work in the automotive repair field, however, this should not matter and I know, as his boss, I must address this issue with him at some point. I probably have waited too long already and am afraid of losing this key person to our team if this subject is brought up. Help!! How do I address this problem without hurting his feelings or our work relationship?

Thanks for helping!

Answer

Dear Reader,

When considering your query, a couple of tactful approaches come to mind. You sound like an aware and considerate manager — one who could talk face-to-face with the offending party and resolve this dilemma with both you and your star staffer smelling like roses. As such, it's prudent to skip right over the subtle and not-so-subtle hints that might save you from dealing directly with this problem: leaving a family-size stick of deodorant on his desk; shrouding him in a cloud of air freshener; saying, "gee, what stinks?" when he's present, and so on.

It's not easy to approach someone about her/his chassis' emissions, but the theme of your question could provide both of you with face-saving solutions. Why not talk with the "offender" when no one else is around? Tell him that he's your best mechanic and that you see even better days ahead for him. Casually add to this praise that he might lob on a little more deodorant in the A.M. because all of his hard work sometimes leaves its mark in the form of body odor. Leave out the qualifiers: "It's really hard to say this..." and "It's not my intent to insult you, but..." Instead, you might admit that everyone (you included) smells, has bad breath, farts, etc. from time to time, and that you wish we would all be more honest with each other in the name of looking out for one another's personal and work success. It couldn't hurt to practice your delivery with someone outside of your workplace before doing it for real, or even acting out a scenario with a trusted friend where you can think about all the possible ways to deliver the message.

Making a big deal out of this situation, or saying that others in the shop have complained, may make your ace sweat even more. Know also that some cultures don't put as much emphasis as others on smelling as fresh as a daisy all day long — in other words, you and your colleagues' expectations of what smells acceptable may fundamentally differ. After all, body odor, wherever it comes from, is usually natural — it's all of the products that keep it out of others' noses that reek of artificiality.

You've decided to take on a management challenge that is getting in the way of your workplace goals. Just because this obstacle has personal and sensitive written all over it doesn't mean that you have to let it stand. You would probably address a worker's chronic lateness, constant absences, or poor overall performance, which could all stem from sensitive, personal places as well (on a side note, it's worth mentioning that these strategies will likely help address many sensitive situations in a number of other settings). If you go into this talk with your genuine admiration and true desire to help all involved in mind, your caring will surely come through loud and clear. With carefully chosen words, it's hard to imagine your prized employee hitting the road for any place other than the drug store.

Alice!

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