

OFFICE SPACE

CAREER COUCH

MATT VILLANO

The Scent Of a Co-Worker

Q. One of your co-workers often has an unpleasant smell. Before you break out the air freshener, is there a polite way to let him know that the odor bothers you?

A. Be aware that many people are unaware of their own odor, said Dr. Alan Hirsch, neurological director at the Smell and Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago. "Just because you can smell someone doesn't mean he can smell himself," said Dr. Hirsch, who cited a 1979 report from the National Institutes of Health indicating that smelling loss affected four million Americans each year. "Body odor can be a very personal and sensitive subject."

Q. Why are some people so fragrant?

A. Everyone has a distinct personal scent; some are less pleasant than others. While unappealing odors often result from inadequate attention to hygiene, there can be other causes: diet can affect body and breath odor, for instance, as can some medical conditions. Sometimes the problem is not human scent but a heavy cologne or perfume that others find obnoxious. In any case, dealing with the situation may not be easy. Jennifer Trevitt, supervisor of investor relations and marketing for Essentially Yours, a dietary supplement company in Burnaby, British Columbia, recalls that years ago at a former job, she had to cope with a co-worker who regularly rode his bicycle to work and changed into business clothes in the men's room without showering. Then he would hang his damp riding clothes in his office to dry.

Ms. Trevitt said she and her colleagues joked with one another about the locker-room stench but never said anything about it to the man because he was a senior manager. "We just learned to deal," she said.

Q. Is it ever appropriate to tell a colleague that he stinks?

A. Maybe not in so many words, but if a co-worker's scent interferes with your ability to concentrate, you're entitled to speak up. Still, be sure to identify the root cause of the

smell and to make sure that it is something your colleague can control. Sit down with your co-worker privately and discuss the issue. Bob Hunsberger, an independent management consultant in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., said he often led clients through role-playing exercises that involved confronting a foul-smelling co-worker. It's important to get to the point quickly, he said.

"The best approach with something like this," he said, "is to take the responsibility to get the facts out there so everyone can move on."

While your first instinct may be to drop a hint in an anonymous note, Dianne M. Daniels, president of Image and Color Services, a career coaching company in Norwich, Conn., says that a one-on-one approach is more effective and can be kinder, if you choose your words thoughtfully and use a gentle tone. "If you think your colleague is 'repulsive' or 'repugnant,' tell him that he's 'less than fresh' instead," Ms. Daniels said. "You want to be truthful, but you also want to give that person the benefit of the doubt and encourage him or her to do something about it."

If a colleague has an unpleasant odor, you may well want to clear the air. But be tactful.

Q. How risky is it to actually tell a co-worker that his scent is repugnant?

A. Calling attention to shortcomings in personal hygiene could embarrass and alienate your colleague, and could even escalate into a shouting match or physical altercation.

Susan Norton, partner at Norton & Blue, a labor law firm in Miami, said that in some circumstances, the discussion could also put you at risk of legal action on grounds of harassment or bias.

"For all you know, speaking up to the wrong person at the wrong time could land you with a harassment claim," Ms. Norton said. "With so many diverse cultures in the workplace today, if you have something to say about body odor, do it in a way that doesn't suggest anything other than that this person needs to take a bath."

Q. Can someone be fired for smelling bad?

A. Surprisingly, yes. Most private companies have policies that govern workplace attire and comportment, and offensive body odor may violate these rules.



Chris Reed

Casey Christensen, a lawyer at Bullivant Houser Bailey, an employment law firm in San Francisco, said that these policies allowed companies to manage their images, and that offensive personal smells could be just as damaging to that image as tasteless T-shirt messages, off-color jokes and obscenity-laced language.

"The issue here is not a visual one; it's an olfactory one," he said. "Body odor is part of the picture that's being presented to co-workers and the public, which means that companies with policies about that picture can take action against those who fall short."

Some malodorous employees may have a legitimate claim to protection under the Americans With Disabilities Act, which provides equal access and opportunities to individuals with disabilities. If an employee can prove that his odor stems from a medical condition or that he is allergic to deodorant, for example, he would probably receive special consideration, Mr. Christensen said.

Q. How do you know that you're not the one offending noses?

A. You can take certain obvious precautions, of course. Bathe regularly and, if you choose, use deodorant. If you feel that you must wear cologne or perfume, do so in moderation. Joy Weaver, author of "How to Be Socially Savvy in All Situations" (Brown, 2005), says the easiest way to know whether your personal scent is disrupting to colleagues is to ask them. Just make sure you're prepared for the answer. □