

How to handle awkward situations at work

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Is a colleague talking too loudly on the phone? Edmonton image expert Joanne Blake suggests an indirect approach. (Shutterstock)

So your colleague smells bad - do you air your concerns or avoid stirring up a stench?

What if their perfume makes you nauseous, so too the smell of their lunch?

Well, scents may clash with sensibilities in the workplace. Social minefields abound, agree the experts, and there are pitfalls when it comes to addressing them.

Be sure to clear the air in a healthy way when shooting straight from the mouth.

Respecting other people's dignity is crucial when you encounter an awkward situation at work, stresses Catherine Bell, an image consultant from Kingston, Ont.

"Before addressing a situation, it is imperative to ask yourself whether you are the appropriate person to deal with it. Many situations are best handled by supervisors or managers," says Bell, of Prime-impressions.com.

According to Edmonton image expert Joanne Blake, managers and co-workers often don't want to address difficult issues because it can jeopardize relationships, so often image consultants are invited in to address sensitive issues.

"How you handle awkward situations says just as much about you because it can impact your relationships and your career. Put yourself in the offender's shoes and ask yourself, would I want to know if this was me and how would I want to be told," says Blake, of Styleforsuccess.com. The relationship you have with the person will also dictate the approach you take.

Rather than make a hurtful comment, says Gloria Starr, tell them what they should be doing without mentioning what they are doing wrong.

How to handle delicate subjects:

- Broccoli alert: Catch their eye and gesture to your own teeth, says Blake. Or quietly and discreetly say, "John, thought you'd want to know that you've got spinach stuck to your teeth."
- Bad breath: "Leave a small bottle of mouthwash on their desk or offer a breath mint and have one yourself," says Starr. Or you can always say, "If I ever have bad breath, I'd appreciate you letting me know. And I thought that you wouldn't mind me telling you that your breath seems a bit stale today," offers Bell.
- Their fish lunch from home stinks up the office: "In a small group setting, say, 'what is that unpleasant smell?' Keep in mind that in our multicultural society what smells dreadful to some smells great to others," offers Starr.
- Using outdoor phone voice: Blake suggests an indirect approach such as asking, "Was the person you were talking to hard of hearing because you seemed to be speaking quite loudly?" More direct: "Would you mind keeping your voice down when you're on the phone as I find it distracting."
- Toilet paper on the shoe: Say nothing; simply point to their shoe, recommends Bell.
- Social media addiction: Say, "one of the things I like best about you is that when I am speaking to you, you stop what you are doing and look at me. Thank you!" says Starr. You are setting them up for success.
- Perfume overload: You can be indirect and say, "Did you get some new perfume? It tends to linger in my office after you've left." Or be direct, adds Blake, by saying, "I'm got allergies to perfume so would appreciate it if you wouldn't wear it to work."
- Office gossip: Being careful not to use a condescending tone of voice, say "I'm really not comfortable with talking about other people behind their backs." Or "perhaps there is another side to this story. I wonder what (victim of gossip) would have to say?" offers Bell.

Tips on minimizing fallout

When should you keep silent? "Most of the time!" says image coach Gloria Starr, at Gloriastarr.com.

Shoot straight from the mouth and clear the air in a healthy way with minimal fallout with these tips from Starr:

- Be kind and soft spoken. The harsher the words, the softer the voice.
- Use gentle wording such as: "May I suggest...; One of the key elements to success in this job environment is...; In my experience, I have found...; Perhaps that would work well for you."
- Always look at the person you are speaking to. You have a heart-to-heart connection and this adds to trust.

Don't dwell on it

If someone's called you out on a behaviour, take heart. Image coach Gloria Starr advises to thank the person for their comment, decide if it has merit, make immediate changes and move on.

"No dwelling on mistakes, take action and move forward. In the big picture of life, most things are a hiccup."

But a few too many faux pas in the workplace can undermine opportunities for advancement, says Starr, of gloriastarr.com.

According to Joanne Blake, business etiquette and image trainer at Styleforsuccess.com, "it does require effort to regain a reputation once tarnished. However, if a genuine apology is offered and the mistake is corrected, those that have been wronged need to forgive and forget."

And if you happen to offend someone through your awkward attempt to point out something personal, adds image expert Catherine Bell, of prime-impressions.com, an apology goes a long way to helping you regain your footing in the office.

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