

THE SIGHTS AND SMELLS OF SUMMER, PART 1

I own and operate a gift shop with approximately 10 employees. About a month ago, I hired a new clerk. She is very nice and does her job quite well, but there is just one drawback: she has a very distinctive and frankly unpleasant “body odor” problem.

I noticed this about a week after she started, and I didn’t say anything because I thought it might just be my imagination. But almost all of my employees have now mentioned it, and a few have told me that if I don’t talk to her about it, they are going to take it upon themselves to say something to her. I certainly don’t want that to happen, but I also don’t know how to approach her about this extremely delicate issue. Am I invading her privacy or subjecting her to a hostile workplace if I bring this up?

This is a surprisingly common question; the problem of body odor seems to have permeated many workplaces in the last several years. It is a phenomenon that is likely to become especially prevalent as we move through the “dog days” of summer. But as an employer, you have the right to set appearance standards for your employees, and you also have the right to regulate the amount and type of odor that emanates in the workplace. Here are some suggestions about how to handle that inevitably uncomfortable conversation:

- Pick a time and place that will ensure the employee’s dignity and privacy. For example, you might want to talk with the employee in your office, in a restaurant or some other place where there is no chance that other employees will overhear you.
- Start out by mentioning that this is not a personal attack or a general condemnation of the person; it is just a concern about a problem that you are confident can be solved. If it is possible to honestly do so, you might also mention the positive things about the employee’s performance.
- Tell the employee directly that you have a concern about the employee’s body odor. Because it is entirely possible that she may have no idea of the problem, be prepared for a surprised and possibly chagrined response. If possible, avoid mentioning the specific complaints of other employees and focus on the general concern. This may help avoid the employee feeling that she is being “ganged up on.”
- Because there are some medical conditions where body odor might be a symptom, you should avoid asking the employee directly if she has a

health problem. You can, however, encourage her to share any suggestions about how to avoid the issue in the future. And if in fact the employee does have a health issue that is causing or contributing to the problem, you can then discuss possible ways to accommodate the situation: getting a fan for that section of the office, moving the employee to a more private or ventilated area, allowing her to work partially at home and/or allowing her to take “cleansing” breaks at the workplace.

- Of course, it is entirely possible that the employee does not have a health problem, but that she simply needs to practice better hygiene. If that case, you can address it as a performance issue and direct her to improve her “performance.”

For more information on this and other important issues affecting Oregon employers, join Technical Assistance for Employers at an upcoming supervisory practices seminar: 2-Day Employee Supervision seminar in Bend on September 10-11 or in Portland on October 14-15. Call 971-673-0824 or visit the website at www.oregon.gov/BOLI/TA