



STRAIGHT TALK WORKS BEST WITH ANNOYING COWORKER

Apr 22, 2002

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He wears too much cologne. She could use some for her body odor. He sings along - badly, loudly - to the radio. And speaking of loud, must everyone overhear her steamy phone call about "last night? "

You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your coworkers.

Lord knows it's difficult enough to go to work some days without the added aggravation of loudmouths, gum-crackers, and the greasy-haired gross-outs who could win trophies for bad odors, bad breath and bad grooming.

Can workers and managers do anything about annoying behavior? Or is the solution to simply grin and bear it?

Experts say ending the misery starts with good workplace policies and hiring the right people. But what works best, and is often the most difficult, is straight talk - person to person in an atmosphere of trust.

If all else fails, there are Web sites that will send an anonymous letter to the offender.

Some nasty behavior on the job might seem harmless, but can lead to racial or sexual harassment, or, at its worst, to workplace violence. But for the most part, annoying behavior is just that - annoying. And it can interfere with productivity.

Besides, who needs it?

Certainly not Bob Kelly, a Philadelphia postal worker.

"This guy at work whistles," Kelly wrote in an e-mail to The Inquirer. "It is loud and shrill. Whatever tune he is whistling is totally unknown by any of us. He can't carry a tune in a wheelbarrow. We think he does it just to be annoying. "

Or, consider the plight of a supermarket cashier in Delaware County, a hapless witness to the love wars between a woman who rings groceries in the next line and her boyfriend who works in the store's deli.

"I don't want to come into work every day hearing about their silly problems," the cashier wrote in an e-mail to *The Inquirer*, asking to remain unnamed to spare everyone anger and embarrassment.

"Every customer that goes through her line has to hear about the problem. Then she gets off the register - leaving me with the remainder of her line - to call her mother [and let] her know what he did. In the meantime, I still have a line backed up into the parking lot."

Anne Ford hears these stories every day.

Moving from finance to flatulence, the 50-year-old former stockbroker now spends her days dealing with inappropriate gas - the number-one complaint from suffering coworkers who write to her for help.

The complaints come via her Web site, www.gentlehints.com. For \$12, Ford will draft an anonymous letter to the offender and enclose a gift to help solve the problem.

Ford says the biggest proportion of the 13,000 letters she has written so far deal with flatulence, followed by body odor, bad breath and greasy hair. Next is too much cologne, and men are the worst offenders.

She said bad table manners is another serious problem, with most requests coming from bosses who want to help underlings learn enough to advance in the corporate ranks.

Ford's flatulence letter begins: "Someone who cares wants you to know," and continues by saying that such matters should not be "released" publicly. Ford encloses some Gas-X, an over-the-counter digestive aid.

Ford's site is not the only one. Other ones include www.coworkerhints.com and www.softsecrets.com.

Some experts say anonymous letters are cowardly, but Ford, who started her business in 1998 in Los Angeles, insists that they give the offending people time to correct their problems without forfeiting their dignity.

Many workers are unaware that they are offending their colleagues, Ford said. "Sometimes ignorance isn't bliss."

And sometimes, office bad manners - from loud talking to interrupting - reflect conditions in society at large.

From her vantage point as a call-in counselor for human resource managers, Rebecca Hastings blames a speeded-up society that has lost its sense of courtesy as well as its sense of self-restraint.

"Life is moving way too fast," said Hastings, who handles 40 calls daily for the 165,000-member Society for Human Resources Management. "People are getting cranky. When people are cranky, it's hard to be polite. "

Layoffs and the resulting workload also can create stress, leading to bad manners. "Even a hello with a crooked smile could bother someone if they are feeling under tension," said Marsha Kleiman of Kleiman & Associates in Elkins Park.

Another factor? The growing diversity of the workplace.

Some might offend unknowingly "because their culture is different," Hastings said. "Body order can be in the category. Americans are extremely fastidious about cleanliness compared to other cultures. "

When the cultural issues extend to religious and political differences, Hastings said workers should avoid those topics. Instead, "employees need to look for common ground," she said. "Even people with very different opinions have something in common. Maybe they both like chocolate. "

When the behavior involves stealing, drug use, or racial or sexual harassment, it can't be ignored.

"Companies are much more worried about harassment suits and workplace violence," said Jill Garfinkle Weitz, a Philadelphia employment lawyer. "It's a very hot issue. Fifteen or 20 years ago, two people in a shouting match would be seen as blowing off steam, whereas, today, I would hope it would be investigated further. "

Avoiding problems starts with savvy recruitment teamed with careful attention to company policy, said James M. McCarty, chairman of the undergraduate department of business and management at the University of Phoenix in Wayne.

"Part of that process is that management must communicate their organizational culture to prospective employees so that they can determine if the [candidates] are a good fit.

"What are the policies governing personal appearance, noise?" he said. "Do you have any policy covering those issues? Are they well-written? If the behavior rises to harassment, a well-worded policy can help you there as well."

Most annoying habits don't require calling in upper management or dusting off the company manual. In the end, solving problems requires perspective, self-examination, and good, old-fashioned communication.

Workers lose perspective, forgetting about their nine compatible office mates and instead focusing on the negative traits of the one annoying one, said Julie Kassalow Norris , of Kassalow Training & Development Inc., in Philadelphia and New York.

"To acknowledge [positive] behaviors can be a powerful way to turn a work relationship around," she said.

Annoyed workers also need to examine why something bothers them, Norris said.

Even if workers can't control an annoying colleague, they can control their reactions to him, treating him with respect and modeling the kind of behavior they'd like to receive, Norris said. For example, if someone always barges in, don't respond in kind. Instead, knock before entering. Maybe the interrupter will get the hint.

Sometimes nothing works except straight talk - a tough task.

"People are very reluctant to give feedback," said Vicki Kramer, a Philadelphia human resources consultant. It's better when done in an atmosphere of trust and with a willingness to receive feedback in return. "You focus on the specific behavior. "

What do you say to a coworker with bad breath?

Kramer suggests starting: "I have some feedback I'd like to give you, but it's not easy for me to give it. When you walk past, there's a very strong smell of garlic and onions, and it makes me feel slightly ill, and I suspect other people may have the same reaction. I have a feeling people would feel more comfortable if you could use some kind of mouthwash. "

Then, she said, continue by stressing the importance of your working relationship along with your willingness to accept criticisms about your issues.

"I think people get momentarily annoyed or angry," Kleiman said. "Sometimes people aren't even aware of the problem. Once they get over the initial shock, I think people will be grateful that they have been given honest feedback. "

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