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Ooo that smell

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Complaining loudly enough for your co-worker to hear may seem easy, but it's not the most effective method of communicating your discomfort or disgust, says Deb Antonelli, president of the Capital Region Human Resources Association.

She suggests employees get together and talk with their direct supervisor and have someone in management deal with the concern, because managers are typically trained in employee relations.

She recalls dealing with an instance of a man with body odor. The office murmurs were constant, and something needed to be done because it was distracting to his co-workers. So Antonelli had a "very humbling discussion with the individual."

"It was awkward. You're telling someone that they smell," she says. "But it was helpful to the individual and to the group."

Ultimately, the hygiene issue was no longer a problem, and the office gossip ceased -- well, at least on that topic.

Anonymous e-mail

For people who are uncomfortable going to their supervisor, or to the individual, there's always the 21st-century way out.

A new Web site from Canada at <http://www.anonymousemployee.com> allows co-workers to send, you got it, anonymous messages to one another. About 75 percent of the traffic is from people working in the U.S., according to Putzier.

"You can bring problems to the attention of the company without exposing yourself," he says. "You can say to this person: 'Are you aware that you stink?'"

It saves everyone the embarrassment, and the offender can even reply. The tactful approach

Tips for tactfully confronting a co-worker whose habits assault your olfactory sense:

* Be careful in your use of terms. While no word is stigma-free, words like stink or offend, don't work. Similarly, don't go for politically correct or cute language such as "hygiene-impaired." This isn't a laughing matter.

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* Start the conversation by sharing your good intentions. For example, "I wonder if I could talk about something that would help me out at work a bit. It's not a huge deal, but it's worth mentioning."

* Limit the scope of the problem. Don't say it's causing you huge grief or everyone else has talked over the issue, treat it like the problem has recently surfaced.

* Keep the discussion private. This will help the other person feel safe remedying the problem.

* If it's feasible, try to give the other person an out or excuse. For example, "Recently I get the feeling that maybe you've been exercising before work or something. In any case, we work so close together that I'm wondering if we can talk about a change that's affecting our working environment." Accept any excuse they might come up with -- bogus or otherwise. This is all about helping the other person save face.

Source: Kerry Patterson, author of "Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High" and "Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior."

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