



Fall 2004

We're Listening!

Thanks to everyone who contacted us about the first issue of Leadership Today! You said that the electronic format provided a "quick and easy read". You also appreciated the "Playing It Out" approach, as you'll be sharing this with many supervisors, managers and group leaders. You generously offered us many more of your daily "heartache" topics to tackle. High on your list were (1) *improving communication styles*, (2) *managing transitions*, (3) *stress and health*, and (4) *supervisory interpersonal challenges*. In this issue, we tackle one of the latter issues – the employee with deteriorating demeanor, personal appearance and hygiene.

While not as disruptive as an angry employee, the coworker with a poor demeanor and unpleasant physical presence is also a challenging experience. The workplace effects are the same, regardless of whether the employee is poorly groomed, inappropriately dressed or even over-perfumed.

Dealing with an Employee's Poor Demeanor and Unpleasant Physical Presence

It can be a challenging experience to work with or manage an employee with a poor demeanor and unpleasant physical presence. A trail of discomfort and avoidance follows the employee wherever he or she goes, leaving others wondering what to say or do. When the employee's performance also slips, the supervisor hardly knows where to start (speaking of discomfort, to avoid offending by our examples, we will be regularly alternating our subject's gender and using initials in lieu of names).

This issue's topic represents a challenging management experience: The employee whose physical presence and declining performance impacts the entire workplace.

1. **Challenge of the Day – How to Approach an Employee who is Functioning Poorly and Has a Distressing Presence**
2. **Exploring the Issue – "F.P.", an Employee with a Deteriorating Demeanor**
3. **Play it Out – A Conversation with the Employee**
4. **Tip of the Day – The Elements of Good Feedback**
5. **About this E-Newsletter**

(1) Challenge of the Day – How to Approach an Employee who is Functioning Poorly and Has a Distressing Presence

We all have expectations of how colleagues at work will handle their responsibilities and present themselves physically to us. Everyone, of course, evidences change from day to day. So, when encountering someone having difficulties, most of us will just assume that things will be better soon. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. When a co-worker's demeanor and appearance take a plunge, it can affect other employees by disrupting focus

and teamwork. And, if things don't get better, it probably means the employee has problems that are not being addressed. When the employee represents the organization to others, this becomes yet another reason to act promptly.

What to do? We have to address the issues as we observe them. And yes, talking about some problems can be even more uncomfortable if the employee is of the opposite gender. But, regardless of the anticipated awkwardness of the conversation, it's crucial to undertake it.

(2) Exploring the Issue – “F.P.”, an Employee who is Functioning Poorly and Has a Deteriorating Demeanor

This situation, submitted by a concerned supervisor, describes a common problem:

Q. I have supervised F.P., a clerk with customer contact, for over fifteen years. Her performance has always been adequate, but I have observed some unwelcome changes in the past four to six months. For starters, she's making many more errors than she used to. She forgot to do her bi-monthly report twice within the past two months. Those she submitted have been full of errors. And today, a very angry customer called me because F.P. failed to return his call after she promised to help resolve a major problem for him. I spoke with her about it, and she just said she must have lost the message. When I talked to her about these errors, she didn't look at me: she just frowned, which she seems to do a lot lately. Accompanying all of this, there's a real problem with personal hygiene. Over the past several months, she has begun to radiate an increasingly objectionable odor. I have heard employees talking about it and some say it's probably due to her sharing a very small apartment with six cats. She is also “slipping” on other aspects of her grooming. Her hair can look like she hasn't washed it for days and her clothes are often dirty and disheveled. I frankly wish I could ignore all of this, but we can't afford to wait and see what happens next. Should I talk with her just about her errors and ignore the hygiene and other issues?

A. No one likes to bring errors to the attention of employees. And, few subjects are as difficult or as sensitive as personal hygiene and appearance. In addition to avoiding topics that are socially taboo, we all hate to risk wounding someone's self-esteem. So it would be natural to try to avoid this portion of the problem. Yet, you are observing a number of changes in her behavior. To ignore any part of the changes does not help the employee, her colleagues or customers. You'll need to address your concerns about her overall pattern of behavior - her errors, appearance and the odor problem.

To avoid “freezing up” or stuttering mindlessly about the most sensitive areas, keep in mind the principle of “if it were me”: If you had all of these problems, you would want – or certainly would need – to know, so you could do something about it.

As always, planning your conversation is of utmost importance. Resources for you in this process are your supervisor, your human resources professional and the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

- Let your own supervisor know about your observations and concerns and get his or her advice.
- From your human resources staff, you should obtain important information about your organization's practices for handling employee performance and behavioral issues, including when to make your EAP referral “formal and written” versus “informal”.
- Since you will be recommending that “F.P.” consult with the EAP, it's particularly important to coordinate with the EAP beforehand. Be sure and share your written notes on the employee's errors and other behaviors, and be sure to include your impressions

and experience in speaking with her about them. The EAP will be able to advise you on the best way to make the referral, including steps to take and follow-up.

Try to avoid discussing the issue with other staff. If they bring it up, however, you can certainly listen to their concerns and incorporate them in your decisions.

During the conversation, try not to diagnose or speculate on the cause of the employee's situation. Your goal is to relate to her as a fellow human being and motivate her to take action.

As always, the challenge is to balance sensitivity with directness. And remember, don't argue, just share information. See how this approach might 'play out' below:

(3) Play it Out – A Conversation with the Employee

The Dynamics

Select a day and time when F.P. appears to be at ease. Perhaps it will be when she has a lighter workload, or when customer contact is lowest. You want to avoid raising her anxiety level and calling her co-workers' attention to your conversation. If possible, pick a time when few people are near her work area to overhear your query. In a pleasant, quiet tone, ask if she can take a brief break from her work in order to go over a few issues with you. Have a private location selected where you can have an uninterrupted, quiet talk. If you use an office, try to avoid sitting behind a desk, which can be alienating in that it symbolizes your authority over her. Wherever you are, try to arrange a nearby area for private telephone access, in case she agrees to contact the EAP at the end of your conversation.

Let her know that you value her contribution to the group's work.

Let her know you have to bring something to her attention that is sensitive and you value her feelings.

Stay relaxed while choosing your words to balance sensitivity with honesty. You will speak most effectively about your own observations, rather than others. Present her with a clear, objective picture of the problems and what you have done

The Conversation

"F.P., can we talk for a few minutes? There's something I need to ask of you. How about our having a chat in here?"

"F.P. we've been working together for about fifteen years. I know that you take your job seriously and try to give the best possible service to our customers."

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable but I need to talk to you about some changes I have noticed in you."

"Over the last four months or so, I've seen quite a few errors in your work, as well as forgetfulness and changes in your appearance. This has concerned me. The phone call I received yesterday from the angry customer has made me even more

to try to help her be aware of them. Give her a chance to give you her perceptions and be quiet while she does.

concerned. You and I spoke on September 3rd and October 10th about your forgetting the bimonthly reports and having more errors in them. It's now late November and problems are still occurring. It's not like you to completely forget someone you have promised to help, F.P. Do you have any thoughts as to what might be happening with you?"

If she has thoughts on what is wrong, let her express them.

"Well, I am afraid I'm just not concentrating as well as I used to. I'm tired a lot. If only I could get better sleep...."

Acknowledge her contribution but don't let it deter you from giving her all the information you need to. Breaking up the negative information into two "packets" may allow her to hear more of it with less defensiveness.

"So you're not sleeping well and are tired a lot. That never helps, does it? I also have to tell you that I have noticed other changes that trouble me. It seems to me that your physical appearance isn't up to your usual standards. It seems like your clothes are not always fresh and you're not grooming your hair as well as you used to. And I have to say that, in the last several months, I have noticed an odor that is on your person. I am not sure what the cause is, but I am concerned and would like to help you get it resolved. Were you aware of any of this?"

Pause and give her a chance to respond. Really listen to what she says.

"No. No one has ever said anything like that to me! And I haven't noticed anyone reacting to me strangely - not at all.

Has anyone else complained? When have you noticed this?" "

Again, be frank, but show your concern. Remember not to argue or involve other individuals who don't wish to be identified. You can repeat information you have already given.

"I have noticed it nearly every day and it seems to be getting worse. I have a sense that others notice, but can't speak for anyone else. People don't want to hurt your feelings, F.P. I have no idea what the problem is and don't think it makes sense to even guess. I would just like to see you get some help."

She may still deny awareness or become defensive, in spite of your best efforts.

"Well, I *have* been cleaning my apartment quite a bit lately and may have had some cat smells on me. And also, I guess I may be smoking more

than usual. I'm afraid I don't notice these smells anymore. What are you saying I should do about this problem I'm not even sure I have?"

Let her know that you understand it is difficult for her to judge her own problem, and think it wise that she get help in this process. This is a good time to talk about the value of the EAP. Offer her an EAP brochure and an immediate chance to get started with a consultation. Let her know that the EAP will try to match any special requests for gender and background of counselor.

You may have received counsel from those you consulted to make this a formal, written EAP referral, since job performance is an issue and you have verbally counseled her several times with no results.

"It may be really hard for you to evaluate all of this on your own – it would be for me, too! I think that the best way is for you is to get some objective, professional advice. To help you understand my thinking, I've written out my reasons for being concerned and for referring you to the EAP." (Give her a copy of the document you have developed with your supervisor and Human Resources.)

"I also have to tell you that, because the office needs you performing as you once did, without errors and forgetfulness, I may have to take disciplinary steps if you don't turn things around. I'd really like you to get help quickly, so you can get a thorough assessment and perhaps even rule out medical problems. And then we can hopefully see you and your work back to normal again. The Employee Assistance Program is an excellent, confidential resource that can help you with what we've talked about. Also, there's no charge for EAP services. So, why not go ahead and call them?" (Hand her the brochure.)

"You can call the toll free number and ask to set up an appointment with a counselor, a female if you prefer, in your area. If you'd like to make the call now, I can leave you alone to use the telephone in here. Otherwise, you can call the EAP at any time, day or night to set up an appointment."

Reinforce the fact that you haven't wanted to offend her. Regardless of whether she says she will get EAP assistance, you should let her know that you will be following up. Set a time to do so that is reasonable.

"I hope I haven't made you too uncomfortable in bringing this up, but if you are having some life challenges or there's a medical problem, it's best to get help as soon as possible. Just do what it takes for yourself and the job! Let's set up a time in two weeks to check in with each other and see how it's going."

Postscript on F.P.: The supervisor's awareness that a change in an

individual's behavior can be the result of a medical condition could be very important for an employee. Lives have been saved because there were supervisors who cared enough to raise difficult subjects.

4) Tip of the Day

In dealing with sensitive issues of employee hygiene and appearance, remember these points:

- Put yourself in the employee's place. If you didn't realize the impact of your personal situation upon others, you would like to know about it, in order to take action. If you did suspect the reality of your situation, but didn't know that help was available, you would be grateful for a referral to the EAP.
- Keeping your empathy foremost, be considerate in your approach and choice of words.
- Be sensitive; however, retain your motivation to get the issue resolved.
- Remember to stay relaxed. It helps to deal with your own discomfort and to deliver unpleasant information in a non-threatening way. And, challenging as it may be, don't forget to breathe deeply; it's important in keeping you grounded!

(5) About This Ezine

Federal Occupational Health (FOH) has a range of programs to improve the health, safety and productivity of the Federal workforce. These programs include Employee Assistance/Member and Family Support, Work/Life Solutions, Clinical Health Services, Environmental Services, and other special programs. The FOH EAP provides assessment, counseling, referral, training and consultation to Federal employees and agencies worldwide. This e-magazine's goal is to help Federal leaders address their workplace relationship concerns. For further information about FOH and its programs, call us at 1 800 457-9808 or visit our web site at www.foh.dhhs.gov.

The articles that appear in "Leadership Today" are published as background information and, as such, do not address specific human resource management concerns. For guidance on handling issues that arise in your workplace, please consult your employee assistance and/or human resources professional.

*healthy bodies
sound minds
a safe place to work*

Federal Occupational Health

Department of Health and Human Services

[Program Support Center](#)

a component of the U.S. Public Health Service