

Biz Journal #1—Professional Dress: How Do You Get Buy-in?  
By Mary E. Rauch

“No socks! I’m not kidding! He came to the job interview wearing no socks! How do you wake somebody up to the reality that dress conveys attitude?”

“Mary, we have a people problem. We hired this young woman straight out of one of the best MBA programs in the U.S. She was at the top of her class. But people are coming to me behind closed doors and talking about her inappropriate and embarrassing appearance.

Yesterday was the limit. When she walked down the hallway with a white, tight skirt on, you could see the outline of her black thong underwear. How in the world do I address such a thing? Help me even begin such a conversation!”

These are not make-believe conversations I have recently had.

It’s a reality: besides being leaders, motivators, change agents, and task masters, employers now must be professional dress consultants as well.

Two essential questions arise: How do you get employees to respect the aspect of professionalism called “professional dress,” and when egregious examples of inappropriate appearance occur, how do you address it?

First, how do you get people to understand that professional appearance sends signals of credibility and maturity? Go to the basics:

- ◆ Have you clearly defined your corporate culture? In writing? In an employee manual?

If your corporate identity is ambiguous, ill defined, or contradictory, employees will go to the most comfortable, informal level of dress and behavior they believe they can get away with.

- ◆ Do you live by your own corporate culture expectations?

When I conduct professional demeanor seminars, these comments usually burble to the surface: “They want us to look better?! You should see them! They’re the ones who should be here!” People smell hypocrisy as potently as skunk perfume.

- ◆ Do you have a dress code in writing? Is it specific? Is it reviewed occasionally? Does it make clear that professional appearance is

not synonymous with buying expensive clothes? (“They want us to dress more professionally? Okay, fine. Increase my salary and I’ll dress as professionally as they want.”)

Also, make sure the dress code comes from the bottom up, as well as from the top down. Create a dress code committee that is composed of all employee levels, both genders, and different age groups. Include as many disparate voices as possible in shaping the “look” they want / you want the office to have.

For instance, wearing hose is viewed differently by different generations. Younger women may find hose to be silly, old-fashioned, uncomfortable, and downright abhorrent. “Everyone knows you don’t wear hose with open-toed shoes!” (And do you allow open-toed shoes?) On the other hand, middle aged and older women may not feel fully dressed without them.

Contrary to many employers’ assumptions, most employees are relieved to have a dress code (“dress guidelines” may be a better phrase)—as long as it is reasonable, fair, representative of their industry, and is not mandated but instead grows out of employees’ voices and values.

But what if you have clear and specific expectations of professional dress in place at your company, but there is still someone who “just doesn’t get it.” How do you approach the subject?

Let’s borrow a page from Linda Talley’s book *Business Finesse: Dealing with Sticky Situations in the Workplace for Managers*. Talley recommends a “communication formula” that works wonders in awkward situations where difficult issues must be addressed. She divides the formula into 3 stages:

1. “Make them right” (Start with an honest, positive statement)
2. “Ask permission” (Seek permission to address an issue)
3. “Tell the truth” (Say what needs to be said honestly, directly, and tactfully)

Let’s go back to that second example in my column introduction: the bright, promising, MBA graduate, with a problem of ...let’s call it “self awareness.”

I often ask clients to script difficult conversations. A script confronting the young woman (timing is everything, and, of course, it would be in private) might go something like this:

- ◆ “Make her right”: “As you know, I hired you because I was impressed with your interpersonal skills. In fact, your skills have sharpened since you have been on the job.
- ◆ “Ask permission”: “May I tell you something that I think may be holding you back from the rapid career advancement you deserve?”
- ◆ “Tell the truth”: “Your professional dress skills are not equivalent to your interpersonal communication skills. One’s professionalism is often times judged by how professionally one dress. I’d like to offer you some suggestions for improvement...may I?” (I’ve concluded with another “ask permission” question.

Anyone interested in professional guidance would take no offense at this approach, and if they do, they have a problem. Observing the response of the employee to these “words to the wise” tells the employer a great deal about the employee’s character, dedication, self-discipline, and commitment to personal growth.

Another option for correcting an individual who “doesn’t get it” would be to have a “Professional Demeanor” seminar for a group, making sure the “offender” is included. This preempts singling out an individual and allows everyone to have a refresher course on professional attitude, behavior, and dress. If handled properly, it also can serve as a great team building experience.

The other day a client asked me, “Can professional demeanor be taught?” “Yes, indeed,” I replied.

“Do some people have a natural instinct for self presentation?” “Yes, indeed,” I replied.

“Do some people remain clueless, no matter what?” “Yes, indeed,” I replied.

So there’s the rub. Employers have to determine who fits into which category and then make decisions about how to approach the issue of professional dress.

But first look in at yourself, your corporate culture, and the written expectations which are given to new employees, on day one of employment. Widespread inappropriate dress in a business may be an outgrowth of unclear expectations, contradictory messages, and a misinterpreted corporate culture.

And that takes more than a “Professional Dress” seminar to fix.

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