



BEYOND THE MIC

with AEM



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Hygiene Horror Stories:

Navigating Difficult Conversations About Hygiene in the Workplace

Hosted by Leah Davis, Tamara Hastings & Brenna Ramy

EPISODE

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NOTE: Because of the nature of ever-changing human resources, payroll, and tax regulations, all information discussed herein is subject to change. Please reach out to us to discuss your organization's unique challenges so that we can provide you with up-to-date information and help you find the solutions.

One of the most complicated and nuanced conversations you may need to have as an HR professional involves a discussion with an employee about their hygiene in the workplace. While there are many personal and cultural factors to consider when working through these issues, the way you handle this topic really gets to the heart of human resources and underscores the true value that an HR team can bring to an organization.

In this episode of Beyond the Mic, Tamara Hastings, Leah Davis, and Brenna Ramy help to guide you in how to handle these tricky workplace situations in a way that is kind, compassionate, and clear. If done well, you may even see the power these conversations can have in strengthening an employee relationship and building trust.

Meet the Hosts



Leah Davis, CPA

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As President of the AEM Workforce Solutions team, Leah uses her background in public accounting, business ownership, and Human Resources and payroll support to provide her team with a strong foundation of knowledge and experience. She enjoys helping clients grow and learn, no matter where they are in their HR journey.



Brenna Ramy, PHR, SHRM-CP

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Brenna enjoys working with leaders to determine the most effective employment model to meet business needs and strategic direction. She has over fifteen years of Human Resources experience in the industries of hospitality, retail, multifamily housing, and consulting.



Tamara Hastings, PHR

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Tamara brings over nine years of experience working closely with business leaders, managers, and employees in a wide variety of HR functions. She has also previously owned and operated her own small business and brings that experience and knowledge with her as she works with clients.

Episode Transcript

Tamara Hastings: Welcome! We're back with Beyond the Mic. Today, I'm talking with Leah Davis, President of the Workforce Solutions team and Brenna Ramy, a Senior Manager on the Workforce Solutions team, and I'm Tamara Hastings, a Senior Associate on the team. We are really excited about this podcast because today we're talking about hygiene more specifically, we're going to discuss how to navigate really tough conversations about hygiene in the workplace. And we promised you some hygiene horror stories today so we'll talk through some of those. However, we're going to spend most of our time talking about how to handle these tricky situations in a way that's kind, compassionate, and still clear. Much of my personal passion and human resources comes from being able to navigate difficult conversations with compassion in a way that actually strengthens a relationship when possible. So although it may initially seem like a silly light topic, it's one that's really at the heart of HR and underscores the value that we can bring to organizations.

Leah and Brenna I'm so glad to have you both here talking with me today about this tricky topic. We're all about keeping this podcast honest and humble, and so it's easy when we talk about hygiene to assume that body odor is just always someone else's problem or something that only happens to other people, but really we're all susceptible to bad days. So maybe we spilled something on ourselves on the way to work and it didn't smell great, maybe we used a new product that isn't working quite as anticipated, or maybe we started a new really well-intentioned exercise program of running or biking to the office. We can be really careful and still potentially be the offender at some point in our lives.

Brenna Ramy: We've all been there. Nobody told me, but I'm sure it probably happened.

Tamara Hastings: We may have just skated by luckily without somebody saying something. I know that you both navigated many difficult situations throughout your time in HR. Have you been in a situation where you've had to have this conversation with someone about hygiene?

Brenna Ramy: Yeah, I have and I think we were even talking as we prep for today, more stories than we could cover in our 20 minutes that we want to use today. So I think one of the things I always say when people ask me for hygiene horror stories is I'm always clarifying, and you really alluded to this in the introduction that there's a difference between a hygiene issue and people being people. Like an average person just might smell one day. They jogged before work, or maybe they got distracted and a little over sprayed on the perfume or I haven't been wearing perfume in this COVID world because I've been at home a lot. So honestly I'm like, wait, how much perfume do I wear? So I'm always trying to clarify, like what's an actual hygiene issue and what's just, you work around people. People are not perfect. I definitely have had a couple of scenarios over the course of my career that I would consider genuine hygiene issues, and a lot of them are complicated in a nuance, but one that I think is an interesting thing to talk about, particularly as we talk about diversifying the workforce and really understanding the nuances between different cultures and what that means to each individual person.

Brenna Ramy(Cont): Something that we've seen happen a lot, and I've personally had this experience multiple times in working in different industries where you have different people groups coming from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. So specifically there are many different cultural practices that seem normal to maybe one group and seem different to another group. An example of this is when I worked in the hospitality industry we had some different cultural practices that their grooming, instead of perfume, instead of deodorant use a lot of different oils. So a lot of oils to particularly clean feet. So in a lot of different cultural practices, they're doing different prayer activities during the day and they might end those pre-activities with certain oils on their feet, they use oils on their hands, their bodies as a cleansing practice.

And I think in my experience, and Leah and Tamara, I think we've all experienced this, that you might have somebody who's never been outside of the United States, or hasn't had a lot of interaction with cultural groups outside of what they were raised with that find that really different. And I think as a director of HR, for example, in hospitality, somebody might come and say, well, I walked into the locker room and it smelled so strongly, and the complaint was really actually not a hygiene complaint. It was just, I don't understand this, I don't like it, it's different. And having those conversations and working through it. So what is considered an actual complaint that somebody is doing something that's, I'm going to use the word wrong. I don't like that word, but there is an issue that needs to be solved versus what is something that's an educational issue. I understand you've never seen this practice before that doesn't make it a practice that shouldn't be happening. It's just something that's new to you, right? So you might use perfume and this person might use oils on their feet. Your perfume is not wrong. Those oils on the feet are not wrong. This is just something that we're working through. But I also think working through, where is that line?

And I know as we get further into this, we're going to talk about how you identify the line. So it's gray and it moves and it's a nuance, but those are some of the areas that hygiene isn't always just a hygiene issue. Sometimes it's a really complicated and really sensitive cultural issue and cultural practices and sometimes it might be education and teaching.

Leah Davis: And I think one of the things we have to kind of understand when you are working with employees is that when we talk about hygiene, a lot of times we're balancing the needs and wants of different employee groups, and you have to sort of negotiate your way through some of that. Like what one person thinks is reasonable may seem offensive to another person. And so it's really trying to figure out where can we find some middle ground and move forward? It's typically not one person is wrong and another person is right. Luckily it gets to be more nuanced than that.

Leah Davis (Cont): Brenna, you kind of touched on that sort of hygiene from a cultural perspective and I actually had a specific situation that was a little complicated because it tended to appear to be sort of a medical issue. We had an employer that we were working with and it was in a manufacturing, agricultural setting. So they actually put on uniforms that they wore while they were working, and those uniforms then would get dirty throughout the day. So they were laundered at the manufacturing site. Well, we received a complaint that one of our employees, a male employee, in his fifties, early sixties, employees had called in and said, so here's the thing we think he actually has an incontinence issue. He seems to be like wetting himself in his uniform every day, multiple times throughout the day. He's not acknowledging that it's happening and even more, the impression was that to try to sort of prove that that's not what was happening. He was not laundering his uniform regularly, and the smell was creating a situation where people couldn't eat lunch in the break room with him. It was just completely overwhelming to be in the same room with him because of the smell of urine basically.

So that was a situation where you have to go in very delicately, this person's trying to not have others notice that this is going on. They're probably embarrassed. They're sensitive about it. There's a very good chance it's due to some medical condition and underlying medical condition that they either aren't aware of. But on the flip side, that is really a hygiene and cleanliness and what can employees reasonably expect in terms of their break room environment. So we did have to work through some of that.

Brenna Ramy: Those are really hard conversations to have on both sides. And like you said, Leah, it's so true that there's very rarely, even if there is something that's happening, that's affecting everybody, and you need to address it. It doesn't make it a right or wrong situation. Like I think it's easy for inexperienced managers or new managers to feel like, well they're looking for right and wrong and solution. And they want, what's the fix to this. And that's like saying, I'm going to fix a person and make them perfect. It's just coming to the table and saying, what's something that we can do to move the ball forward, to help this work for everybody and maintain those relationships.

And I know we're going to talk about that a little bit more Tamara, but like you said, it's about really relationships because it's people. Hygiene is a very personal, very emotional topic for people. Either very strongly in reaction to it, or they feel embarrassed, or they don't want people to know so it's a really important thing.

Tamara Hastings: Absolutely. And I think we'll see the theme throughout this is that initially we kind of make light of these hygiene stories, but when it comes down to it, there's often something else going on underneath. And that's what we, as HR professionals, really need to get to the heart of to figure out how do we work with this person, how do we help them maintain their dignity as we're going through a difficult situation and are there other things going on that we need to have conversations about.

So I want to take a step back, as we're addressing the hygiene issue, is body odor a problem? And I know that sounds like a really obvious question, but I want to start at the root of why hygiene can be an issue in the workplace and why we're even talking about it within HR. So let's talk about that. Why do we think it's a problem?

Leah Davis:

Oh, the perpetual BO problem. So you're exactly right. When this stuff comes up, HR professionals need to take a big step back and say, okay, I'm going to take a deep breath. What are we dealing with here? Have we had a complaint? Was it a one day thing? Brenna mentioned, we all have an off day forgot to put deodorant on, tried a new kind, didn't work. I mean, that kind of stuff happens.

So I think the first thing is to take a step back and try to get an idea of, is this an ongoing issue? Is this a new thing that's happening because I think when we prepare to take the next step, that's going to matter. I think the other thing to just keep in mind is that everyone's expectations are different. Everyone's practices are different. A lot of people are switching to more natural products and so that threshold of like, what is pervasive body odor. If you're just catching a whiff of it when you're standing within two feet of someone, is that something that we really need to get involved in, or is it the whole room smells when a person comes in? I think it's getting a gauge of that.

I think where the real issues can come in, where I do think that HR professionals may need to step in and ask is it becoming overwhelming when someone's in proximity to someone else? Is it creating distractions in the workplace that are actually making it difficult to do work? Is this person working with clients and what impact might that have if their client or customer facing. Is it creating situations where, like it or not, employees are hesitant to be in small meeting rooms with that employee or if they're traveling for work, nobody wants to ride with that person and maybe they are not aware of it, but other employees are trying to sort of distance themselves from that employee. I think we do need to get involved if we think that it's creating a culture in our environment where people are making fun of, or talking about or making comments to that individual. So I think those are all the things we need to consider.

So my answer is, yes, it can be an issue in the workplace that we would need to tackle, but it's a shade of gray. So there's a spectrum of how big of an issue it is.

Brenna Ramy:

And I do think what's interesting is that sometimes the issue you have to tackle is actually not the person who quote unquote has the issue, but the person who brought the issue. Where there's this expectation of I'm just really bothered by this, right? Their perfume is disgusting or they just don't like they don't wash their hair every day. So I think some of it too is just exactly what you said. They had taken a step back and not having a knee jerk reaction to what needs to be solved because when you work with people, you work with people.

This is a really silly example, but the sound and clicking of a pen drives me nuts. It absolutely drives me bonkers. It's like a thing I've had for my whole entire life. Do you know, who's responsible for that in the workplace? Me. I'm responsible. Nobody else that I work with and somebody could sit at their desk and click their pen all day long because they have a right to click their pen. It's no big deal. They're not actually doing anything.

So I think it's a really silly example, but I use that for me internally as an HR person to be like, is the issue because the pen clicking issue is mine, decidedly, mine. Like I only own that and it just bugs me, but I need to get over that. So I think figuring that out is hard and important and it's the first step in trying to figure out what is this issue I'm solving.

Leah Davis: I'll just add one thing. I think you really hit on something. I think it's a good practice for us to look at hygiene in the workplace a little bit like we look at personality in the workplace, right? We're all going to have annoying traits, whether it's our hygiene or our personality that might bother people in the workplace, but there's certain things you're not going to make a big deal out of just a personality quirk. And I think we need to be accommodating at times with some of those hygiene things too, just because you don't like the kind of perfume I wear, that's not actually my problem.

Tamara Hastings: Agreed. I love that analogy because I've heard it too. We're not all supposed to just smell like roses all of the time, and we have this idea that we should all just smell amazing and flowery, but we bring our whole selves to work where we're there a lot and life happens. I think that's a great analogy to keep in mind. And also just similar with personality, we all have triggers and bad days and things like that that don't go perfectly. And so Brenna, like you said, stopping to investigate, what's going on here? Does this person expect that everyone smells like roses? Because if so, maybe we need to adjust those expectations on that side before we address the other person.

Brenna Ramy: I do think Tamara, I know we said it already, but I really want to pound this in too that not all cultures do think smelling like roses is a good thing. There's a lot of cultures that don't do any deodorant, that don't do regular bathing, it's not an option, honestly. I worked with a very large group of employees in hospitality where many of them came actually directly from refugee camps where they had lived in and they were displaced people for a variety of reasons.

This is a long rabbit hole I won't get into, but traditionally when you live in a refugee camp, that's for a very long time. So you're following a very specific process to get to the U.S. And in refugee camps imagine the lack of regular showers, body hygiene practices. There isn't an expectation. So I think some of that is that their expectations might be different and that doesn't make anybody right or wrong and getting those balanced out is very challenging and nuanced and important because we don't want to get into this, well my expectation is right. Like you said, Leah, that personality thing. So just because I'm loud, doesn't mean everybody should be loud. I am loud by the way. But we're both right. And it's okay.

Tamara Hastings: I think these are all great ways to look at it. And it helps us really analyze the situation and investigate. But if we have decided that this is a problem, it is a problem. And a lot of times it, it is an issue that has to be addressed. One of my nightmares and letting this go too long is that if I don't address it with training and professionalism, someone who lacks all of those things and happens to sit next to them, will try to address it, and now I've probably got a bigger problem. So we have to be the person to come in and say, all right, we know how to handle this. Let's just do it. So let's assume we have a problem on our hands and let's talk about how do we work with this?

Brenna Ramy:

You're right. There is a line and we've kind of talked through, maybe it's not a problem and what is the problem. So we've identified, there is a problem and somebody needs to have the conversation.

One of my experiences was with somebody who had some pretty major bodily challenges happening that resulted in their office chair regularly smelling and it was impacting the office. Everybody was wanting to leave, asking for new cube locations. So some of the most important things you can do are to start with seeing this person as a person. So you've identified an issue and you don't need to solve the issue. You need to connect with the person to figure out what you can do to work together to actually solve that problem together. Because the truth is, like Leah said, if you know it's a problem, that person probably knows it's a problem, too. People are aware. They might not be self-aware of the fact that other people know, but they know about themselves.

So the first thing you want to do is really just be clear when you're talking with that person about what the expectation is, is not to solve them as a person. To say, this is happening in the workplace and we want to find a way that you feel comfortable, that everybody else feels comfortable, and here's kind of why we're talking about it today. And I think it's important. I know in a minute here, we're going to talk about the actual conversation, but to not use the word issue. It's hard to not hear I'm an issue if you were to say I have an issue with what's happening with you. So to be really clear that, one of the things that we value at this workplace is that everybody feels comfortable, everybody feels safe. What we want to do is create a work area where everybody can feel like they can come to work and get their work done and how can we work together to make that happen.

It's hard to say, we're going to set an expectation for hygiene in orientation that people remember and latch on to. It's important to talk about it, but I would say just in practice, if you remember your first week at work, you're drinking out of a fire hose and you don't remember half of what they say, you don't remember half of what you read, everybody signs the handbook. I'll just admit, does everybody really read it line for line? So I think it's creating an expectation in your workplace that the goal is to create an environment where everybody feels supported and valued and like they have a workspace that allows them to focus. So kind of bring it back to those things and that everybody here is valued, everybody here can talk through what they need, and the focus is that everybody can have a workplace where they feel able to focus on their work. We want to find a way to talk about how can you as the person that you're talking to have that and how can your coworkers and peers have that too.

I think when we talk, setting the expectation hygiene policies are really interesting and we could probably do a whole podcast on hygiene policies so I don't want to go down that rabbit hole, but because I think particularly when you look at cultural practices and norms, this can be really complicated, or it can be really easy and say, our hygiene policy is focused on creating and maintaining a workplace that allows people to focus on their work and not face challenges and distractions in a regular way that gives you some breathing room on a really general basis because if you got real specific again, we could get really specific into it, but if you say clean and presentable, what does that mean? That could mean different things to different people.

Brenna Ramy(Cont): I think a lot of times we hear the language professionalism. That's kind of a catch all, it's out there, but I think having the expectation and the policy that we value people and we want the workspace to give people an opportunity to focus on work.

Leah Davis: There's this sort of overarching culture and policy that you have in place but tactically, if we kind of shift to like, yep, we've identified that we have this issue, how should organizations come at it whether they have a policy or not? And I think just important to do it one-on-one. I see so many employers give into the temptation of, we have one person who has terrible body odor or fill in the blank hygiene issue. We're going to send out because this is awkward and uncomfortable for everyone. We're going to send out a blanket email and we're going to remind everybody that, it's summertime, make sure you wear deodorant or whatever. Don't do that. Everybody in the workplace knows who you're talking to. Half the time, the employee you want to get the message, doesn't realize it's intended for them anyway. All it does is cause a whole bunch of chatter and really it's not kind to the individual who's, whether they know it or not, probably being talked about already. So have it in-person, don't procrastinate, be kind, and give that feedback. And you've got that meeting set up, make a decision: do you include their manager? Can you coach the manager to do it themselves? But go into it again, like you said Brenna, seeing them as a person and coming at it from a I'm going to give you some feedback.

I don't know how many times I've gone into hard conversations where it's okay to say I got to give you some feedback today and I'm really nervous about it and I'm afraid that you're going to feel uncomfortable, but we're going to get through this together. I'm coming from a place of wanting you to be successful and I think this might be getting in the way of some of that so I'm just going to level with you and here's what we have going on. So I think it's just going through that. I'm not making any judgements, we're getting feedback that there's this issue, not issue, right Brenna? That there's a smell, there's a fill in the blank with these specific hygiene issue. This is a situation we always say feedback is a gift and clear is kind. Be clear. If they're coming into work with that hygiene thing because they don't recognize that anyone is noticing it potentially. So be specific and clear and find out, just let them speak, give them a little space to talk through it, ask questions, how can we help you, is there some consideration we need to know about so that we can kind of balance of how to move forward? Just level with them.

Brenna Ramy: I think every conversation I've had to have about a tough hygiene scenario that I've started with I just want to be able to talk openly with you and a hundred percent understand this probably feels uncomfortable for you, that I'm not the person you want to be talking about this and to just be honest about how nobody goes into these conversations thinking this is going to be super fun so let's just acknowledge that and let's start and be open and they tend to go pretending like it's a really fun, super normal conversation doesn't help anything. It makes them feel like they should put on a front or a show or just nod and say yes and it rarely ends with a great solution.

Tamara Hastings: I think that's great. Really talking about the manager piece of it and thinking back to my past experiences, and sometimes the manager might be the right person to have this conversation and maybe gender, maybe whatever that is, we may not be the right person. And I think that's important to recognize as well.

Now I say that I've had managers in the past that their idea of this conversation would have been, you stink, fix it. So in that case, coach, the manager, or maybe we take that conversation on, but you know, I think it's worth thinking about sometimes too, are we the right person to have that? I mean, we may go in very compassionate, but maybe that person just doesn't want to hear it in the way that we would present it. And so how do we mold that message?

A tendency we have too sometimes as being too nice because we want this conversation to go well, we're nervous about it, and I think about one time I had a manager who fired someone and the person came back the next day and sat at their desk and started working. And so I had to go in and handle it and she was so nice. She didn't know she was terminated. Leah, you said clear is kind, we want to be kind and compassionate, but we also need to get the message across that this may result in disciplinary action if it doesn't get fixed. And maybe we don't start exactly there, but there are consequences if this truly is a distraction and a problem, which it is if we're having this conversation, that that may need to be discussed on some level. And that's really hard to hear, but if you don't tell them and then you turn around and terminate them, or someone else tells them, you're not doing them a favor by having that conversation in the right way.

So it's important that where we're firm in that as well, and we make sure they walk away with the information they need and not just, well, that was a nice conversation, but what was she trying to tell me? Which can happen sometimes.

Leah Davis: One thing I want to add Tamara that as you were saying that I think when we talk about what to do in this scenario, you know you said step back, take a step, think about the other person, think about Leah went through all these steps. I think the other thing that we really underutilized in the world of HR, I don't feel like I do anymore because I feel after 20 years, I know the value of it is that if you've never had a conversation with somebody about hygiene, tap into your peer network of HR people and call and say, I've got this situation, could somebody just like bounce off a conversation with me, and has anybody ever had this happen? Could you tell me things you've tried? Don't be afraid. This is a great opportunity to leverage your peer HR network and talk about it because there's a lot of value in that.

And then just to leave you with, whenever you're having these conversations, make sure you're not missing any disability or medical accommodation flags. So there's a lot of situations where you may come into a hygiene conversation and leave it with an understanding or an awareness of a potential disability that you may need to accommodate. So go in knowing that that might come out of some of those conversations. And remember, employees don't need to say any magic words. If we've been made aware of a disability, we need to know what to do next. So I think that's just an important takeaway to end with.

Tamara Hastings: And look at this as an opportunity to maybe find out what those underlying concerns are. I hate to even bring this up, but it could be that you find there's a domestic violence situation and this person is homeless or living in a shelter and there are other things going on where we can provide resources and actually make a really big difference and strengthen that relationship with the employee and make their life better. So I know that's a far way to come from some odor in the workplace, but that's where we find ourselves a lot of times. And if we can look at it that way, we can go in with the right attitude. So really appreciate that.

The last thing I'll mention too, is that what you don't want to do is tell people to wear a fragrance or something to cover that up either. So be cautious of that as well. There are fragrance and scent allergies that people have so fixing it isn't go ahead and put deodorant on and make sure you do that before you come in and spray some perfume. There's a balance there as well.

Leah, Brenna, I appreciate you both being here and tackling this tough topic with me. We have a unique opportunity in HR to handle difficult conversations with compassion and also help employees solve issues that get in the way of them doing their best work. Life unfortunately, isn't as easy as just checking your problems at the door. We spend so much time at work, that our life issues are going to inevitably impact us in the workplace at some point or another. But fortunately, someone trained, like us, to have these conversations can talk with employees and provide them tools and resources for those obstacles so that they can refocus and get back to performing their best work, which is ultimately what I believe people really want to do.

Thanks, as always, for joining us. And we'll be back next month with a new episode of Beyond the Mic.

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