

Your office neighbours from hell.

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By: Wallace Immen

In the past, office veterans enforced informal standards of decorum that were handed down to newcomers, says Toronto-based management consultant **Linda Allan**, who specializes in workplace conduct and attire.

But with many employees today working on short-term contracts or moving regularly between departments or employers, there's nobody around long enough to set the rules. As a result, behavioural norms are in constant flux.

Cutbacks create clashes.

Corporate budget cuts have resulted in reductions of secretarial staff and cleaners in many offices. People who don't tidy up after themselves in the workplace kitchen or leave the office copier empty of paper are consistent sources of annoyance for fellow employees, Ms Allan says.

It's casual, maybe too casual, every day.

A trend toward casual dress throughout the week also encourages a more lax attitude toward desk housekeeping and manners, such as thinking it is all right to put your feet on the desk or yell across an aisle rather than walk over to speak to a co-worker, Ms. Allan says.

So what's the best strategy?

In most cases, making people aware of your concerns will make them try to change, Ms. Allan says. "Often people have no idea that what they are doing is annoying others," she says. Avoid using phrases such as "you always do this", or "I hate that," which are likely to create resentment because they pass judgment on someone else's behaviour, says Ms. Allan.

A better approach is an observation, such as "the last time you used the copy machine, you left the paper tray empty. I'd appreciate if you would refill it when it runs out," she says. Pointing out the effect the behaviour is having on your performance will convey the message that it would be a good career move to make changes, says Ms. Allan.

And the message should always be delivered in person, not in an e-mail, and always in private. "It's best to request a time to discuss the situation so that the person doesn't feel blindsided," she adds. "And never deliver your message as an ultimatum," Ms. Allan advises. "You're best off leaving it to the other person to offer to come up with some sort of solution."

Defence against offence

Is a colleague's offensive behaviour driving you to distraction? It's time to take action. Here are tactful suggestions from workplace consultant Linda Allan:

- Decide what's really causing the problem. For instance, the loudness of a conversation might be resolved by using a desk phone rather than a cell phone.

- Be kind and respectful in your approach. Being angry or accusatory will only escalate the issue.
- Discuss your concern in person, never in an e-mail. Request a convenient time to talk in private and in confidence.
- Deal just with one issue at a time and not a list of complaints.
- Be truthful and direct about what's bothering you.
- Use neutral statements. Describe the issue plainly. Avoid making judgments or using phrases that imply the person should feel shame or embarrassment.
- Listen to the other person's side of the story. In many cases, the offender has no clue his or her behaviour is offensive.
- Let the person suggest options to solve the issue. In most cases, people are anxious to try to change behaviour that affects their working relationships.
- Thank them for their time and tell them you appreciate their professionalism.
- Don't mention the situation again (assuming it goes away).

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