

## JOB COACHING AND ACCOUNTABILITY: LESSONS FOR RUSTY

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Dress code is a tricky subject, isn't it? Sometimes we find ourselves enforcing one standard with staff and a more lenient standard with attorneys. This makes a dress code conversation with staff seem even trickier. When is the right time to address an inappropriately dressed staff member? I'm focused on your terrific legal secretary, Rusty, who has an occasional misfire in his attire. How many people are "ratting" out Rusty when you haven't even seen him?

As an administrator you strive to be liked and respected. You work hard to be perceived as fair, and as nice. And likely you are. That's fantastic. The difficulty is that a majority of the time we stop there. We are loved by all, feared by some, and abused by anyone who can get away with it! Do you know this feeling? Are you ready to develop a culture of accountability? The easiest way to do that is employing job coaching. It's time to shed any embracing of blame and pass responsibility to the firm back into the lap of the employee.

When you hire a new employee, you explain the nuts and bolts of the position they are interviewing and/or accepting. You offer the very tangible description of the duties and the reporting lines, and now you also begin explaining that accepting this position is accepting a responsibility to the organization, to the firm in which you are being hired. You, as the manager of the business, are holding the accountability around this responsibility. Your employees are not responsible to you; they are responsible to the firm itself. You create the necessary balance for your employees between their job responsibilities and their duty to the firm.

A critical piece of the accountability conversation begins with you holding yourself accountable to the standard. In the case of Rusty, we're talking about dress code. Are you adhering to the policy at all times? Despite senior partner infractions that are outside your control, despite associates who might hold themselves as "golden children", you must hold yourself to the standard you are enforcing with your staff. Without this small piece, you have no opportunity to affect change through coaching accountability.

Our next move is to make this accountability conversation as first person as possible. In other words, you don't want to start your conversation with something like "Suzie tells me \_\_\_\_\_". Instead, begin this conversation with, "I've noticed \_\_\_\_\_". This likely means you will have to put a little extra effort into following up on those reported infractions from other staff members. Walking the halls or the floors (which I hope you are doing anyway) and mingling with the staff to oversee what's going on, and taking note of those behaviors/things that could be improved by having some conversations in the near future.

So, now you know Rusty's been successfully violating the t-shirt policy most weeks, and the sandal policy has an equal number of violations. It's time to sit down for your first conversation, and so you invite Rusty to your office Wednesday morning, when, conveniently, he's in a t-shirt. Begin with the positive affirmation of some talent he brings to the firm. In this case we'll say he's very good at processing workflow timely and his attorneys are delighted with his turnaround time. So, you open the conversation with a blanket, "The firm

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really enjoys your ability to handle the caseload you have at your desk. Thank you for making my job easier in that regard.”

Now you want to explore what is happening with the dress code. You might begin with, “Rusty, I would like to talk with you about some of the firm’s policies and procedures. In particular I’m noticing your attire today, and wonder what you recall about the firm’s dress code policy.” Give him some time and space. Let the silence (if there is any) exist. This can be the difficult part - where you wait to hear what Rusty has to say. This conversation can go lots of directions, right? Rusty can say he has no familiarity with the policy. This is a great opportunity for you to print the policy (or you may already have it printed at your desk before the conversation begins. I suggest having a copy of your handbook within your reach at all times) and review it right then and there with him. No need to make him read it aloud, or otherwise create a teacher-student atmosphere. Rather, paraphrase it and provide him the page number of his handbook to read later at home. This is also a good time to remind him that he signed something saying he had read and understood all the policies of the firm included in the handbook (you are doing that, right?) and this is one of them. Confirm with him what acceptable dress includes and excludes and move on with your day. Confirm with him. That means you explain from your perspective and then ask him to reflect back to you what he has heard, along with any questions he might have. Once he says he has no more questions, then confirm that you’re excited to have him in compliance with the policy so that both of you can use your time productively for the firm’s benefit.

“So that” is the powerful connector between what you are requiring of your people and the reason you are requiring it. Call it the “buy-in” for your conversation. Using ‘so that’ really anchors what the benefit is to compliance with the agreement you have just struck. The accountability piece of his confirmation with no more questions will hopefully never be brought up again, as you both return to harmony in your respective days!

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Let’s fast forward a little, and assume Rusty dresses quite snappy for about three months, and then slips into a week of flip-flops followed by a few days in the next week where t-shirts are his choice. You’re having a second conversation with him about his choices – and they are his choices – so take a deep slow breath and settle in to some more dialogue with lots of questions.

“Rusty, thanks for coming to my office. I’m curious about your choice to wear a t-shirt today. What’s that about?” As before, let the silence hang until he speaks. You’ve included the magical words, ‘your choice’ which reminds him of your previous conversation and his commitment to a different choice than the one he made today. You might hear something about oversleeping and not having time to iron a shirt. Maybe it will be that the laundry hasn’t been done and he chose a clean t-shirt over a dirty polo shirt. You’re listening, and yet not so long that he spells out his whole life story. You’re only interested in his choice for today. If necessary, rephrase with. “That’s something we can talk about later if you would like, today I’m only interested in this choice” to get him back on topic.

Your next move is to step into accountability with a question, “Rusty, you are a valued employee here. What will it take for you to adhere to the dress code of this firm so that you and I can avoid this conversation in the future?” or, “... so that the firm can feel confident that you are adhering to the policies that are in place for all the staff?” Another possible question might be, “Rusty, when we last discussed the dress code policy we left in agreement that you would be following the policy. What has changed?” And a third option, “What can you do to ensure your proper attire even on days you oversleep (or whatever his excuse is)?”

You are carefully crafting open-ended questions to allow him to create his solution. Continue asking open ended questions until he has some clarity and commitment to a different performance standard. You are guiding him to accountability that will be a win-win. As humans, we enjoy the feeling of performing to a standard that we have set. In this case, you have a standard the firm has set, which is a responsibility for your

employees to receive a paycheck. That doesn't automatically create accountability for everyone. Rusty needed a little guidance to get there, and I'm guessing you have people like Rusty in your firm.

Play with the open ended questions, use the 'so that' to anchor the process, and let me know if I can assist in any way. Good luck!

For more information and further reading on Accountability, visit our [online library](#).



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Judy understands teams. And she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, finance, and legal management to help law firms improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

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