

Conversations about Personal Comfort and COVID-19 Safety Practices in the Workplace

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Some staff may feel concerned, uncomfortable, or even irritated when a person not wearing a face covering is in their presence.

However, before jumping to conclusions about their intentions and beliefs, we might first try understanding and compassion. Making assumptions and shaming others for their behavior does not change minds or solve problems. Demonstrate that Iowa State University Extension and Outreach is a caring community by approaching these conversations with care.

So, what can you say to someone who is not wearing a face covering?

When approaching someone about a concern, we can choose between a harsh response and a soft response. In this case, we are focused on a productive conversation that ends with us feeling more safe or comfortable around the other person. Ultimately, a soft response may be helpful because harsh responses can result in a loss of persuasive power with the other person as they raise their defenses and reject our input.

Scenario	Harsh Response	Softer Response
Louis works in the extension office in Smith County and a colleague frequently passes near his workspace and stops to chat with no face covering on.	You are risking your safety and mine. Do you just not care?	Good morning! I'm glad to see you. I wanted to let you know that I have some concerns about my health and my family's health. We are being very cautious right now. So, I would like to ask that you wear your face covering when you come by to chat. Thank you for helping me with this!

Scenario	Harsh Response	Softer Response
<p>Bonnie works at the front reception space at the extension office in Smith County. There are signs prompting visitors to stay at a six-foot distance from the desk. A visitor comes in and walks right up to her desk without following the directions.</p>	<p>Can you not read the signs? You need to step back right now; you are way too close to me!</p>	<p>Hi, welcome to our office. We are practicing physical distancing in our office to minimize the spread of the virus. I'd like to ask you to step back to that spot on the floor so I can make sure we stay six feet apart. Thank you so much. How can I help you today?</p>
<p>Greta is a supervisor whose staff are inconsistent about following office policies related to face coverings. Some do it very consistently and others hardly do at all. Staff have complained to Greta that they are frustrated with non-compliance. Greta has encountered Sarah in the break room and she is not wearing a face covering.</p>	<p>Why are you in here without a face covering? Others are complaining because of people like you who will not follow expectations. You need to go put a face covering on right now.</p>	<p>Hi Sarah. It's good to see you. Hey, I notice you are not wearing a face covering and I wanted to make sure you understood our office's expectations related to them. Because we want to be really cautious and conscientious of each other's health and safety, we are asking all staff to wear a face covering if they are not alone in a private office. Do you have one you could put on while you are in this shared space? If you need one, I can help you with that.</p>

General Communication Principles

1. **Use “I” statements to keep the conversation in a productive tone focused on finding a solution.** You could say, “I am so happy to see you! I have some concerns about my family’s health, and I would feel safer if you had your face covering on.” This is a good example of an assertive way to voice your feelings regarding wearing a face covering and making sure your needs are met.
2. **Compliment or thank people who do wear a face covering to help to reinforce that behavior and shape the office climate.** “Thanks, Bob, for wearing your face covering today.” or “I love your ISU face covering!”
3. **Assume good or neutral intent and focus on helping instead of judging.** For example, “I am sure you don’t mean any harm, but may I request that you wear a

face covering right now, because I am concerned for our safety? I would really appreciate it.”

4. **Acknowledge the effort someone is making and be clear about your boundaries and request.** “I appreciate your sensitivity towards me by standing beyond the 6-foot limit since you are not wearing a face covering. If we need to work more closely together or chat for a while, would you please wear a face covering?”
5. **Keep the reasoning about you, not them.** You can speak for yourself better than you can speak for anyone else. “Since I am concerned for my health and my family’s health, would you consider wearing this face covering right now (it is new and has never been used).”

If the other party chooses not to comply with your requests, you cannot force them. If the behavior is a violation of office policy or expectations:

- Share concerns about non-compliance with a supervisor. They should then clarify the policy with anyone who has demonstrated non-compliance. Continued non-compliance is a work performance issue.
- If your office, partner organization or program guidance has a policy that requires face coverings at Extension events, you may need to respond to members of the public who do not comply. It is a good idea for offices or work teams to come up with shared language around this. Make sure you provide options for accessing Extension resources online or through touchless pickup/drop-off, if the situation allows: “I’m afraid we cannot allow you to attend the training in person without a face covering. However, we have an online version of the course being offered next month.” or “Please step into outside the door and I will place the materials on our pickup table in the lobby. Once I return to the office, you can come in and grab them.”

Responding when someone asks you to wear a face covering

Some people will choose not to wear a face covering for a variety of reasons. If face coverings are not required by policy in your environment, yet someone asks you to wear one, consider these ideas in responding:

- Respond in a way that is productive and respectful of your needs and the other person’s needs.
- Maintain physical distancing and share with those who are concerned that you will do so.
- Follow the general communication principles listed above for a productive conversation.

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