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(U) SIDtoday editor's note: Today we debut a brand new column: "Ask Zelda!" If you, as a supervisor, encounter a tricky problem and don't know what to do, see whether Zelda can offer a solution! Here's a little background about our columnist:

*"Zelda" is the pen name for a manager who has spent most of her 29 years at NSA in SID (and its predecessor orgs), supplemented by several years in career development (ADET). Her managerial experience includes approximately 20 years as a first-line and mid-level Agency supervisor, as well as supervisory positions in the entertainment and food service industries. Zelda develops and teaches leadership training as part of the National Cryptologic School's Adjunct Faculty, and enjoys bossing people around outside of work, too.*

Today's question (the entire text below is unclassified):

Dear Zelda,

Now that the warm weather is here, some of the newer Agency employees in my office are dressing in ways that are less than professional. How do I, as their supervisor, get them to stop dressing like they're going to the beach when NSA doesn't have a formal dress code?

Signed,  
Prudish Prudence

Dear Prudence,

Oy! Once the thermometer hits 80 degrees, it can look like Ocean City West around here. Somehow, shorts and flip-flops don't exactly convey the image of a fierce SIGINT warrior.

You are right to be concerned, and I applaud your initiative as the supervisor to take corrective action. Not only is beach attire unprofessional in the workplace, but in certain cases it can be downright distracting to co-workers (if you get my drift).

The main thing to remember when counseling the offending employees is that they probably don't know any better. For some, this may be their first real job after graduating high school or college. Your approach should be to educate, not to discipline (unless you have already "educated" them more than once and there has been no change in behavior). Hold a private counseling session as soon as possible where you explain that, while NSA has no formal dress code, they are expected to present themselves in a professional manner -- and that includes their attire. You may also want to take the opportunity to advise them on "dressing for success" so that they are taken seriously in their new career. In fact, it might be a good idea to have this talk with **all** new Agency employees, informing them of the standard level of office dress before it becomes an issue.

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You, as the supervisor, are in a position to set guidelines for what is appropriate in your work center. Both the physical location and type of work being done will help you determine what these should be. If safety is a concern (like when operating dangerous equipment), impress upon them the importance of wearing steel-toed boots or long-sleeved shirts, even if they make one hot in the summer. What may be acceptable for employees working on the roof, in an overheated machine room, or crawling under floor tiles is probably not appropriate for desk job workers in an air-conditioned office. Do your employees fill a customer liaison role or one where they represent the organization to others? That may require a more formal level of dress than solitary workers who rarely interact with others.

On the other hand, you must balance your demands with the employee's physical comfort and the desire to express one's individuality. Remember that embracing diversity extends to the wardrobe, too!

So, Prudence, to summarize my advice: )

- Decide what is appropriate for your work center -- and try to be inclusive.
- Inform your employees what the office dress code is and why (I find people are more likely to comply with rules if they understand the reasons behind them).
- Ask them for specific behavioral changes (ex.: they are welcome to wear sandals at work, but please refrain from wearing rubber shower thongs in the office).
- Answer any questions and address their concerns.
- Thank them for their cooperation.
- Enforce the rules equitably among your people.

As with most things, communication is the key to a happy and productive workplace. With a little proactive discussion on your part, your staff can look professional during the summer months. So the next time one of your employees looks like they work at the National Snorkeling Academy instead of the National Security Agency, try these tips and let me know how it turns out.

*Edna*