

# A Manager's Role: What If You Suspect Alcohol or Drug Abuse?

If substance abuse is contributing to an employee's poor performance, ignoring or avoiding the issue will not help the situation. Abuse of alcohol or other drugs inevitably leads to costly and potentially dangerous consequences in the workplace unless action is taken to confront the issue.

It is important to note that diagnosis of an alcohol or other drug problem is **NOT** the job of the manager. However, remaining alert to changes in employee performance and working to improve employee productivity is a core component of every supervisor's job. Because substance abuse seriously affects an employee's ability to fulfill his/her responsibilities, supervisors play a key role in keeping a workplace alcohol and drug free.

To carry out this responsibility, a supervisor must clearly understand a company's drug-free workplace policy and have the ability to identify performance problems that may be the result of alcohol and drug abuse. Furthermore, a supervisor should be capable of making appropriate referrals to employees in need of assistance for alcohol- or drug-related problems.

## Identification

The following performance and behavior problems are common to many employed individuals who abuse alcohol and/or other drugs.

It is important to note that if an employee displays these symptoms, it does not necessarily mean he or she has a substance abuse problem.

## Performance

- Inconsistent work quality
- Poor concentration
- Lowered productivity
- Increased absenteeism
- Unexplained disappearances from the jobsite
- Carelessness, mistakes
- Errors in judgment
- Needless risk taking
- Disregard for safety
- Extended lunch periods and early departures

## Behaviors

- Frequent financial problems
- Avoidance of friends and colleagues
- Blaming others for own problems and shortcomings
- Complaints about problems at home
- Deterioration in personal appearance
- Complaints and excuses of vaguely defined illnesses

## Intervention

When an employee's performance deteriorates for whatever reason, his/her supervisor has an obligation to intervene. The supervisor does not need to be an expert on alcohol and drug abuse to do so because the intervention should be focused on the employee's performance problem(s). Supervisors who need to confront a staff member about a performance problem that may be related to substance abuse may follow the following principles of intervention:

- *Maintain control.* Stick to the objective, not suspected facts about work performance.
- *Do not rely on memory;* have all supporting documents and records available.
- *Do not discuss alcohol or drug use* unless the employee mentions it.
- *Be clear and firm.*
  - Explain company policy concerning performance.
  - Explain company drug-free workplace policy.
  - Explain consequences if performance expectations are not met or the policy is violated.
  - *Be supportive, but avoid emotional involvement.* Offer help in resolving performance problems, and identify resources for help in addressing personal problems.

Do not hesitate to get advice from your human resources department. They can help you understand what actions are allowed or not allowed by employee policy and/or union rules, and how to initiate a disciplinary plan. They often understand benefits as well, if the employee asks about referrals. You can also call your Employee Assistance Program.

## When the employee acknowledges he/she has a problem

When an employee voluntarily admits to a drug or alcohol problem, do not panic and instead, continue focusing on the need to improve performance, the employee's responsibility to take care of whatever may be behind the performance problem(s), and the provisions of your organization's drug-free workplace policy. As well, consider the following:

- Make a strong referral to your EAP or to a relevant mental health professional, and let the employee know there is help available. EAP and mental health services are absolutely confidential. You may also call your EAP yourself for consultation on how to best make the referral. Working through an EAP can often help maximize the chances of the employee following through.
- The employee may be eligible for medical leave or short-term disability if he/she chooses to pursue treatment. The employee can speak with his or her primary care physician, or a mental health professional or treatment program, for more information.
- Be clear about the expectations for performance that remain on the table. Define clearly what the employee must do to keep his or her job in terms of:
  - Job performance
  - Behavior
  - Consequences of failure to meet expectations
  - Approach the employee firmly and clearly, but not without caring and concern