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Employee Assistance Program



Substance Abuse and the Workplace
The Role of the Supervisor

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Substance Abuse & the Workplace

The Role of the Supervisor

Objectives:

1. To Identify Signs and Symptoms of Substance Abuse
2. To Provide Guidelines for Effective Intervention
3. To Provide Supervisory Guidelines in the Event of an Accident
4. To Review Supervisory Guidelines in the Event of Reasonable Suspicion (“For Cause Behavior”)

Identifying Signs and Symptoms of Substance Abuse

The hard-to-convince manager often says, “Show me the signs of alcohol and other drug problems in my workplace, and I’ll believe you.” The next reaction may be, “Show me how to spot drug use. I don’t even know what *they* (a joint or bong) look like.”

Unfortunately, by the time visible evidence of drug use turns up – the telltale odor of marijuana smoke, empty bottles, an overdosed employee – the problem has usually been there for a long time. This visible evidence represents a small portion of what is really going on. Managers need to be able to spot drug abuse symptoms long before visible evidence turns up.

Signs and Symptoms

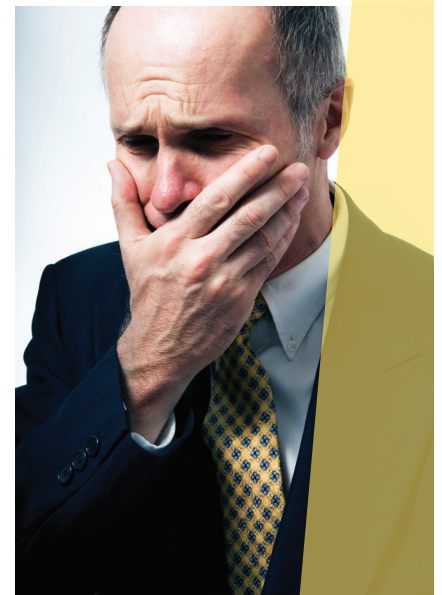
Being able to recognize the problem early, and act, will save valuable human resources and money. This is difficult because the early signs of substance abuse blend so subtly with the array of problems managers deal with. Alcohol and other drug abuse tend to exaggerate some of the following:

1. Personnel Problems

- **Absenteeism.** Alcohol and other drug abusers are absent an average of two to three times more than the normal employee.
- **Poor morale.** Chronic substance abuse creates wide mood swings, anxiety, depression, and agitation. Healthy employees often see the behavior of substance abusers as a safety hazard and they see them as poor team workers.

2. Production Problems

Chronic substance abuse physically and mentally affects the employee. These effects occur not only during acute intoxication (from one to 24 hours after intake), but also show up as residual hangovers, fatigue and mental impairment. Other physical and mental effects may include:



- Slow reactions
- Poor coordination
- Delayed decision making
- Confusion
- Learning difficulty
- Poor memory recall
- Loss of concentration
- Mood swings
- Resistance to authority

3. Direct Signs

Signs and symptoms pointing directly to serious substance abuse include:

- On-the-job drug use
- Paraphernalia: needles, balloons, aluminum foil wrappers, sniffing tools, marijuana smoking pipes and holders, drug containers obviously not used for legitimate purposes
- Drugs: bags of marijuana, small containers of tablets, capsules or powder accidentally dropped or stashed for later sale or use
- Intoxicated behavior
- Odor of marijuana smoke
- Empty beer, wine and liquor bottles

4. Behavioral Signs (What to Look for)

When a supervisor notes a performance or behavior problem in an employee, the following indicators may point toward possible alcohol and other drug usage.

An employee who is using alcohol or other drugs while at work may exhibit all or some of the following characteristics:

- Bloodshot or watery eyes
- Very large or very small pupils
- Runny nose or sores around the nostrils
- Blood stains on shirtsleeves
- Wearing sunglasses indoors or in all weather
- Slurred speech or unsteady gait
- Emotional outbursts, depression, anxiety or withdrawal
- Unpredictable responses to ordinary requests
- A lackadaisical "I don't care" attitude
- Secretive behavior

- Forgetful and indecisive
- Impulsiveness, erratic work performance
- Changes in personal appearance
- Jitters, hand tremors, agitation, irritability
- Carelessness
- Sleeping on the job

Any one of these symptoms may point to many problems other than drug abuse. But when a pattern begins to develop, the supervisor or manager needs to be alert and act quickly. These behaviors can lead to greater absenteeism, higher operating costs, serious production problems, and an increase in accidents and health care costs.

The temptation to steal is always present on the job. However, increasing internal theft may point to increasing drug abuse by employees.

Common sites for on-the-job substance abuse include, but are not limited to:

- Lunchroom and lounge areas
- Near lunch trucks and vendors
- Parking lots and cars
- Infrequently traveled areas
- Meeting rooms
- Equipment or other out-of-the-way rooms
- Restrooms



Signs of Drug Sale or Group Abuse

- Leaving the work area frequently
- Visits by strangers who have no legitimate reason for being in the work area
- Secretive phone calls
- Visiting the lounge or restroom frequently, particularly at nonbreak times
- Frequent trips to the car, often with other workers
- Gathering of a group of workers in an out-of-the-way spot during breaks

A manager or supervisor who witnesses some or all of these behaviors would have reasonable cause to discuss changes in behavior with the employee. If not satisfied with the responses provided by the worker, referral for assessment and/or counseling may be appropriate.

Although incidents of suspected substance abuse will not all be the same, these step-by-step procedures should provide a useful guide for actions you must take when such incidents occur.

Confronting the Employee

When an employee's behavior or performance makes confrontation necessary and you suspect there may be a substance abuse problem, follow the steps described below. The focus of the discussion must be on the behavior and the performance problems observed. Maintaining the employee's self-esteem throughout the discussion is imperative.

Specifically describe the behavior/performance problems and why they concern you.

Describe observations you've made ("I've noticed you have lost your temper with Bill and George twice in the past week . . .") or performance that has declined ("I counted three errors this past week and four last week . . ."). Leave no doubt about the performance or behavior you are discussing. If there have been previous discussions, be sure to recap them, including any actions the employee agreed to take ("We discussed this problem several weeks ago and you agreed that you would . . ."). Emphasize the impact on the organization, and other employees, of the behavior or poor performance. This discussion should be handled without becoming emotional, threatening, angry or accusing to the employee.

Ask for, listen to and respond to the employee's reason.



It is critical that employees be allowed the opportunity to explain their behavior. It is equally important that the supervisor listen and respond with empathy. However, it must be made clear to the employee that the problem (behavior or performance) must be corrected. The employee must accept responsibility for the problem before the supervisor moves on to the next steps. If the employee fails to accept responsibility for the problem, or this discussion is the result of the employee's failure to correct the problem after previous discussions, the consequences of failing to correct or improve must be discussed. Communicating consequences is not intended to threaten or punish the employee but instead lets the employee know the importance of correcting the problem.

Stress that the situation must change and ask what the employee will do to solve the problem.

Emphasize that correcting the problem is not a question of "if" but rather "how" and "by when". The problem is the employee's. Thus, it is critical that the employee takes an active role in finding solutions. People work harder to solve problems when they have a voice in the solution. The objective here is to generate possible solutions. The discussion can then focus on choosing which action the employee is going to take.

Agree on the actions the employee will use and schedule a follow-up session to review progress.

Discuss each realistic idea and offer your recommendations for solving the problem. Your recommendations could include referring the employee to the EAP for professional help. Once an agreement has been reached on what the employee will do to solve the problem, it is important this be documented and reviewed with the employee. Finally, agree on a specific follow-up date to review progress.

If you expect to get information directly from the Employee Assistance Program regarding the employee, request that the employee sign a release allowing the EAP to provide such information. Determine if you want the employee to set up the Employee Assistance Program appointment or if you want to initiate the contact and provide background information. Conclude by continuing to express your confidence in the individual's ability to solve the problem.

Guidelines for Effective Documentation

Thorough documentation is one of the primary responsibilities of the supervisor in any of these episodes. Any supervisor involved, even indirectly, should create a detailed written history of the facts of the incident. Accurate recall of these facts is more likely if the documentation occurs soon after the actual event. Pay particular attention to details that answer the What? When? Why? Where? How? and Who? Record all conversations with the employee in as much factual detail as possible.

Documentation of your observations (specific behaviors) and the facts of the situation (performance data, attendance records, etc.) provide a solid base of information you can refer to during discussions with the employee. Documenting the results of discussions is equally important. Later, you may also need to refer to agreements and commitments made. Also, it is imperative that the situation be fully discussed with your Personnel Director before taking any action.

Supervisory Guidelines in the Event of an Accident

If either an accident occurs in which medical assistance is required, damage to property occurs, or it appears the injury will result in absence beyond the current work day, and factors are present which may suggest that the employee may have been impaired, a "fitness for duty" evaluation may be appropriate (e.g., apparent driver error, no explanation for the accident, etc.).

- Make sure the medical needs of the employee are the number one priority. Determine if an ambulance is appropriate or if some other method of transportation will be adequate.
- Document the entire situation including all dialogue and the known factual details of the accident. If another supervisor makes the trip to the clinic, that person should also document his or her observations.

Supervisory Guidelines in the Event of Reasonable Suspicion ("For Cause Behavior")

If you observe suspicious, "unfit for duty" behavior:

- Approach the employee, ask questions and observe how the employee responds/behaves.
- If you are not satisfied with the response and you continue to believe the employee is "unfit", ask the employee to accompany you to your office or a meeting place that offers privacy. Find another supervisor to accompany you when meeting with the employee.

- Continue questioning the employee about the “unfit” behavior observed (e.g., Why do you appear drowsy? Why are your eyes dilated?, etc.).
- Confer privately with the other supervisor. Allow this supervisor to also conduct a fitness-for-duty observation/evaluation.
- Confer with the department manager responsible for administrative review.
- If you believe the individual to be “unfit for duty,” suspend the employee from his/her work activity. This decision does not require concurrence of another supervisor/manager.
- If alcohol/drug testing is appropriate, initiate process.
- Offer him/her transportation alternatives.
- If the employee insists on driving, tell the employee that local law enforcement officers will be contacted if they drive off the company premises.
- Tell him/her when to call in or report in (usually start of next work day).
- If the employee drives off the premises, contact law enforcement officers.
- Write up the facts of the situation. Do not include conjecture or the opinions of others.
- Contact your manager/Human Resources and present information.
- Possible charges in such cases could include violation of safety rules (if unsafe acts are committed), reporting for work in an unfit condition, insubordination, or being under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

CAUTION-In a situation requiring the steps above:

- Do not attempt to physically restrain the employee.
- Do not accuse the employee of being on drugs or alcohol or being drunk. Focus on the observable, “unfit” behavior.
- Do not confront the employee in the presence of fellow employees.
- Do not diagnose the nature of the employee’s problem. Be accurate in what you say and what you write. Record only objective facts.
- Do not procrastinate in writing up the incident. A “fresh” memory is always the best.
- Do not record opinions or conjecture, only the facts.
- Do not tell anyone who doesn’t “need to know” of the incident.

NOTES

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