

Substance Use and The Workplace



“An employee came in today smelling of alcohol and staggering. We learned that colleagues often smell alcohol on his breath, but they haven't involved a supervisor until now. What can we do from here?”

“One of our Sales Executives was at a client event where she was drinking. She made inappropriate advances towards prospective customers... it was very unprofessional. What are our options?”

What can you do when you have concerns about substance use?

I. Consult company policy

- Does your company have a Drug Free Workplace Policy?
- Does it cover things such as intoxication on the job? Drinking while at a company-sponsored event or while entertaining clients? How is it worded?
- What happens if an employee admits they have an alcohol or drug problem?
- Does your company do drug and/or alcohol testing?
- Can you do reasonable suspicion testing? (if applicable, see accompanying handout)

Substance use is not an easy topic to talk about, especially in the workplace. Stigma and shame may make it hard for employees to admit their own behavior. Teammates may not voice their concerns. They may fear consequences for their coworker, being disloyal, anger or backlash.

Ignoring this issue can have serious repercussions in the workplace. Injuries, lost productivity, and deadly workplace accidents are just some of the possible consequences.

As a manager, it can be difficult to manage these situations. You need to monitor behavior, identify problems, while also respecting employee privacy.

Examples of workplace behavior that can be observed and documented

- Frequent absences or tardiness
- Reduced job efficiency
- Lowered productivity
- Increased errors
- Mood swings, anger, argumentativeness
- Complaints from coworkers or customers
- Unreliable
- Missed deadlines
- Inattention or impaired judgment
- Forgetfulness
- Increased difficulty with complex assignments
- Reduced awareness of what is going on
- Increase in workplace accidents
- Difficulty recalling instructions clearly
- Away from desk or job for long periods
- Bizarre or abnormal behavior on the job

2. Write down your observations

- Do not make assumptions (verbally or in writing) about a drug or alcohol problem.
- **Do not diagnose the behavior.** They can also be the result of a medical condition or other issue unrelated to substance use.
- Do not tell the employee you think they have a “problem.” Be specific, staying focused on workplace behavior.
- Follow company policy regarding drug testing.
- Consult with HR about what you’ve seen and if/when a meeting with the employee should take place.

3. When you meet with the employee (based on your policy)

- Share your concerns about the behavior or physical appearance you have observed.
- Focus only on the employee’s job performance and work-relevant behaviors. Do not moralize, counsel, lecture, or psychoanalyze.
- Point out how their behavior impacts policy or performance.
- Ask them to explain what you’ve observed.
- Hold them to the same work standards as other employees.
- Some employees may react defensively or with anger. Stay calm and acknowledge their feelings.
- Explain what will happen if the behavior does not change.
- Offer resources for help, such as EAP, if you have them available.
- Make a plan to address the concern and follow up.

Keep in mind

- Never discuss your suspicions with unauthorized persons.
- You do not want to let sympathy for the employee’s problems mislead you. Be aware they may try to manipulate you to avoid dealing with the issue.
- Misguided “kindness” can delay real help reaching the employee. Don’t cover up for a friend.
- Follow your company’s guidelines for enforcing the policy on drug and alcohol use. Don’t make exceptions or play favorites.
- Do not allow an employee who may be impaired to perform safety-sensitive functions.
- Take immediate steps. Delayed action can threaten the safety of others and allow the problem to worsen.
- Take any threats seriously by reporting them, per your company policy.
- Remember, these problems aren’t likely to “go away” without professional help.

You may call the EAP for a management consultation with an Employee Assistance Consultant to discuss concerns and next steps.

This information is for educational purposes only. It's not medical/clinical advice. Always ask your doctor for appropriate examinations, treatment, testing and care recommendations.

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