

For Managers: Recognizing and Dealing with an Alcohol- or Substance-Use Problem at Work

As a manager, you are in a unique position to notice an employee's alcohol- or substance-use problem and to take action to refer the employee to help, following your organization's policies. You are responsible for maintaining a safe, healthy, and productive workplace, and for being fair and consistent in managing employee performance.

Know your organization's policies.

Familiarize yourself with your organization's policies around alcohol and substance use, and make sure that these are clearly communicated to employees.

Some organizations, and some jobs, have extremely strict standards when it comes to alcohol or substance use among employees, often for safety reasons. These standards and rules may be balanced with programs to help employees recover from a substance-use problem and return to productive work. (Note that substance use includes the misuse of prescription pain medications, some of which contain opioids and are addictive.)

Know the warning signs of alcohol and substance use.

As you monitor employee performance, be alert to changes such as

- Attendance problems
- Errors and inconsistent work quality
- Reduced ability to focus on work
- Mood swings
- Withdrawal from colleagues
- Sleepiness or fatigue
- Less care of personal appearance

Have a conversation with the employee about any performance issues.

The signs above are indications of a personal problem, not necessarily of alcohol or substance use. That might be depression, exhaustion from family caregiving responsibilities, a medical condition, or stress from another cause. When you notice any of these problems, they should prompt you to have a conversation with the employee about work performance after documenting specific examples of work lapses. It's appropriate to ask about any challenges or changes outside of work that may be causing the performance problems (recognizing that the employee does not need to share that information). If the issue is with substance use, be prepared to meet with defensive responses rather than an open admission of a problem.

Whether the performance problems are caused by alcohol or substance use or another personal problem, your role is to remind the employee of your expectations for the job, clearly describe the gap between those expectations and the observed performance, and suggest that the employee seek help from your employee support program. Your human resources (HR) representative or a specialist at your employee support program can help you plan for this performance conversation and coach you on how to word your suggestion that the employee seek help.

If you have noticed more specific indications of alcohol or substance use, such as slurred speech, unsteady walk, dilated pupils, bloodshot eyes, or hyperactivity, it's appropriate to mention your observations as part of the performance-management conversation, but not in an accusatory way. These signs, too, could have other explanations, such as allergies or the effects of medication for a health condition. Keep the focus of your conversation on observed work performance, with specific examples.

Follow your employer's policies around testing and referrals for support and treatment.

If your organization or work unit is required to follow drug-testing protocols, a substance-use problem may be detected as part of routine testing. When that happens, a qualified substance use professional (SAP) may need to do an assessment of the employee, and the employee may be barred from working until the SAP confirms that the problem is resolved. If you have any questions about these requirements or your role in the process, contact your HR representative.

Whether the employee seeks help voluntarily for an alcohol- or substance-use problem or is required to get help by your organization's rules, you should continue to be supportive and encourage the employee to resolve the problem so that they can resume productive work. Note that being supportive is not the same as being an *enabler*. An enabler ignores, helps to hide, or minimizes the significance of an alcohol- or substance-use problem in misguided efforts to be kind or avoid conflict. Be encouraging while holding the employee accountable. Continue to monitor the employee's performance, giving positive feedback when deserved and pointing out performance lapses as needed. A specialist at your employee support program may be able to offer guidance on appropriate ways to express your support and share performance feedback in ways that help the employee move forward.

If an employee denies having a problem and refuses to seek help, but continues to show poor performance, you will need to deal with it as you would any performance problem. Follow your organization's performance-management protocols.

Continue to encourage the employee and manage performance.

When an employee has dealt with an alcohol- or substance-use problem and returned to productive work, be aware that the recovery process can be gradual and may involve relapses. Continue to monitor and provide feedback on performance, as you would with any employee, and be prepared to repeat the process of referral for alcohol- or substance-use counseling.

This was adapted from *A Manager's Guide to the Employee Support Program*.

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Disclaimer: This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice, or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.

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