

SAVING EMPLOYEES WHO ABUSE ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

by Phillip Perry MA



The change was as unsettling as it was sudden. For years Dan had been a model employee, his dedication and enthusiasm an inspiration for everyone. His work ethic crumbled, though, with the deterioration of his marriage. He began coming in late and letting his performance slide. He began cold-shouldering patients and treating co-workers rudely.

At first his manager ignored the problem, issuing a couple of half-hearted remarks and figuring Dan would turn himself around. Finally, though, the other shoe dropped: One day Dan came back from a two-hour lunch break with his breath smelling of alcohol. A short time later he was found asleep in his department's lounge coffee area and was not easily awakened.

Costly Problems

Dan's story is troubling but not unusual. Even the best employees can fall into the trap of alcohol or drug abuse with tragic results for their careers and families. From the employer's point of view, substance abuse can have a real impact on the bottom line and on patient care. It's bad enough to lose a productive individual who represents thousands of dollars worth of training. Just as costly, though, are the productivity and morale problems left in the employee's wake: Inconvenienced co-workers, increased operating costs via temps or overtime needed to replace the employee, perhaps even lost revenues.

"Close to 10 percent of workers, on average, are struggling with alcohol or drug abuse problems at any one time," reports

Matthew Steinkamp, vice president of service delivery at Midwest EAP Solutions, a St. Cloud, Minn., organization which assists employers with troubled workers. "The cost to employers nationwide is estimated at \$100 billion a year in lower productivity, higher accident rates, and greater health insurance and workers compensation costs." Indeed, substance abuse accounts for some 40% of all workplace accidents.

Alcoholism has consistently been the most common substance abuse problem, according to Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems, a research group at George Washington University Medical Center. The patterns of employee social behavior may change, but the core problem remains the same. "It's true that we're seeing fewer people returning from three martini lunches, but more young people are going to bars after work," says the center's director, Dr. Eric Goplerud. "Studies show that about 20 percent of workers under 25 are actually drinking in ways that are hazardous to their health."

EAPs can help

Today's stressful work environment, with its demands for greater productivity, increases the risk of substance abuse. To a large extent, employers can resolve the problem by providing pathways for assistance in the form of Employee Assistance Programs, or EAPs.

"Everyone from time to time has a problem that affects work performance," says Gail Buss, vice president of business development at People Resources, an EAP in St. Louis. "The problem is that they don't know where to turn for help. What organization or counselor should they call?"

The employee's conundrum is made worse by the sense of vulnerability experienced by anyone who falls into the substance abuse trap. First there is shame paired with the desire to keep the problem under wraps. Second, there is the fear that the problem will result in work termination that will result in hardship for the employee's family.

No wonder, then, that employees are attracted to help centers that offer confidentiality and collaboration. "An EAP is proactive," explains Buss. "Troubled individuals can self-refer themselves before their problems get too serious and even before their employers notice performance problems."

Employers, too, view EAPs favorably. It's one thing to spot a slide in worker performance caused by a personal issue; it's quite another to know what to do about it. "Most employers don't see their purpose in life as identifying and treating alcohol problems," notes Dr. Goplerud. "And many people in general feel uncomfortable confronting someone else on the issue. So they see a problem but are at a loss about what to do." Indeed, doing the wrong thing can bring about unwanted results.

In this tricky psychological and legal environment, an EAP can be a real life saver. "The EAP will put the troubled employee in touch with a local counselor," explains Buss. "And the EAP will make sure the counselor has the proper state license and insurance. A good EAP assures the employer and the employee that the clinical service is of high quality."

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Taking action

So how does the troubled employee get from the workplace to the EAP? Many times employees place calls without any prompting, attracted by the anonymous nature of the EAP. This is called a "self referral." In other cases, though, employers can press the issue based on observations of employee conduct. These "management referrals" may be sparked by repeated behaviors such as these:

- Significant changes in mood
- Changes in hygiene
- Attitudinal changes
- Increased accidents
- Unexplained absences, especially on Fridays and Mondays
- Falling asleep at the desk
- Frequent trips to the bathroom
- Financial difficulties and requests to borrow money

As troubling as such behavior is, management referrals must be done carefully, in a way that complies with state and federal anti-discrimination laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act. Consult your institution's attorney to establish procedures for such referrals. "Clear guidelines for supervisors and managers are essential," says Steinkamp. "There should be a step by step procedure mandated around observation, confrontation and documentation."

In particular, managers and supervisors need to concentrate on performance issues when confronting troubled employees. Attempting to identify the cause of problematic behavior will only put the employee on the defensive and possibly set up the employer for a discrimination suit. "You need to be careful about assuming alcohol or drug abuse," cautions Steinkamp. "Behavioral aberrations can stem from many other problems such as financial issues, marital and family crises, and depression." All of these problems may or may not be linked in some way to substance abuse. "The important thing is not to diagnose the troubled employee, but to provide avenues of support to help the individual recover and once again become a productive member of your workplace."

Happy endings

There are many happy endings to stories such as the one that opened this article. "Our studies show that a worker who has received treatment for an alcohol problem is more likely to stay in the job and be more loyal to the employer than the average employee who has never had an alcohol problem," says Dr. Goplerud. "So the end result is positive: You end up with a sober worker who is more stable after treatment than his colleagues."

That's certainly a better conclusion than the alternative: "Workers that have alcohol problems that are not identified and treated are about 50 percent more likely to leave their jobs than those who do not have problems," says Dr. Goplerud. "Employers incur replacement costs as well as productivity losses."

Obtaining the services of a good counseling organization, then, seems to be part and parcel of maintaining a stable workforce. "The EAP is a service where everyone wins," says Buss. "Your institution gains if you can help troubled employees get back to work. And your employees gain as they overcome personal problems that might otherwise cost them their careers and their families."



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