

Substance Abuse in the Workplace: Intervention Techniques

If substance abuse is contributing to an employee's poor performance, ignoring or avoiding the issue will not help the situation. An employee's use of alcohol or drugs may be the root of the performance problem; however, substance abuse on the part of someone close to the employee also could be the source. Regardless, 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 a supervisor. 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.

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.

The following principles of intervention may be followed by supervisors who need to confront a staff member about a performance problem that may be related to substance abuse.

Maintain control

- Stick to the facts as they affect work performance.
- Do not rely on memory; have all supporting documents and records available.
- Do not discuss alcohol or drug use.

Be clear and firm

- Explain company policy concerning performance.
- Explain company drug-free workplace policy.
- Explain consequences if performance expectations are not met.

Be supportive, but avoid emotional involvement

- Offer help in resolving performance problems.
- Identify resources for help in addressing personal problems.

Also read our articles, [Signs of Substance Abuse](#) and [Addiction: How to Recognize It and What to Do about It](#) to learn more. These and other articles helpful to supervisors can be found on our web site, www.firstcallep.org.

