



Alcohol Use | *Tip sheet*

A Supervisor's Guide to Alcohol Use in the Workplace

The impact of alcohol use in the workplace can manifest in many different ways. **Absenteeism** may be 4 to 8 times greater among alcoholics and alcohol users. Family members of people with an alcohol use problem may also have greater rates of absenteeism. **Workplace accidents and injuries** are far more prevalent among alcohol users.

Your role as manager

For most employers, an employee's decision to drink is their personal business. However, when alcohol use interferes with an employee's ability to execute his or her duties, there is cause for concern about proper work performance, health and safety issues and workplace conduct.

As a supervisor, it's your job to manage work flow and appraise the work performance of your employees, including performance that may be affected by alcohol use. While you are not responsible for diagnosing alcohol use disorders in employees, it is your responsibility to take corrective and disciplinary actions to address performance or conduct problems of all kinds, and to refer employees to Employee Assistance Program (EAP) when needed.

In some instances, you may not know that performance, conduct, and attendance are due to an alcohol problem. In others, you may know because the employee admits to using alcohol or the problem is self-evident. For example, an employee may become intoxicated while on duty or be arrested for driving under the influence.

Your role in dealing with alcohol use in the workplace is crucial. The most effective way to get someone to deal with an alcohol use problem is to make them aware that their job is on the line and that they must get help to improve performance and conduct or face serious consequences including the possibility of job loss.

Monitoring behavior

There are many signs that may indicate an alcohol use problem and trigger a referral to the EAP, including:

Leave and Attendance Issues:

Attendance: Unexplained or unauthorized absences, frequent tardiness

Health: Excessive sick leave

Patterns: Regular absence the day after payday or frequent Monday or Friday absences

Emergency excuses: Frequent unplanned absences due to "emergencies" (e.g., household repairs, car trouble, family emergencies, legal problems)

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Performance Issues:

- Missed deadlines, sloppy work, incomplete assignments, along with many excuses for this
- Production quotas not being met
- Attendance issues/Increased Tardiness

Unusual Interactions:

- Work relations:** Strained relationships with coworkers
- Behavior:** Acting belligerent, argumentative or short-tempered especially in the morning or after weekends or holidays, becoming a "loner"
- Financial issues:** Noticeable financial problems evidenced by attempting to borrow money from other employees or receiving phone calls at work from creditors or collection agencies

General Behavior Issues:

- Hygiene:** An odor of alcohol on a person, excessive use of mouthwash or breath mints
- Physical:** Unsteady gait, bloodshot eyes, tremors/shaking, falling asleep on duty
- Mood and behavior:** Changes such as excessive laughter or inappropriate loud talk
- Work issues:** Avoiding supervisory contact especially after lunch

Note: Not any one of these signs means that an employee has an alcoholic use problem. However, when there are performance and conduct problems coupled with any number of these signs, it is time to make a referral to the EAP for an assessment so that the employee can get help if needed.

Conclusion

Avoid being an enabler. An enabler is someone who allows a person to continue alcohol use or addiction without holding them responsible for their actions. What you may consider kindness may actually lead to allowing the employee to continue to engage in self-destructive behaviors. In addition, when a supervisor fails to hold an employee accountable for alcohol abuse can have a negative effect on coworkers' morale.

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Examples of supervisory behavior that might be considered enabling include:

- Covering up for the employee or lending the employee money
- Accepting absence excuses from an employee's spouse rather than the employee
- Failing to refer the employee to the EAP (Employee Assistance Program)
- Shifting the employee's work to their coworkers or adjusting their schedule to compensate
- Trying to counsel the employee
- Making excuses to others about the employee's behavior or performance

Alcohol use or dependence is a disorder. Employees who suffer from it need an employer's compassion, however, your compassion has to be firm in order to communicate that, while you are willing to help the employee get assistance, the employee is ultimately responsible for his or her own rehabilitation, recovery, and performance.

The best help that you offer as a supervisor is to learn something about the disorder, refer the employee for assistance, and hold him or her accountable for his or her conduct or performance.

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