

How can I manage substance abuse in the workplace?



## SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN THE WORKPLACE: SPOTTING THE SIGNS AND TAKING ACTION

Your once prized employee can't seem to get into work on time, has questionable hygiene, falls asleep in meetings and appears to have forgotten the meaning of deadlines. Their work quality has diminished, they're having major problems at home and seem to spend more time away from their workspace than they do at it.

You can't prove it, but all the signs are there—you have major suspicions that your talented employee has a drug or alcohol problem. So as a manager, how can you deal with the obvious issue without making false accusations or violating workers' rights? How do you know if it's drug abuse or a whole slew of other possibilities? Although it's a delicate subject, there are steps you can take to confirm your fears, confront the employee, offer your help and protect the safety of the rest of your team. You just need to be aware, move quickly and tread gently.

### Tread Lightly

One sign or symptom isn't usually reason enough to be concerned. But, if you start to notice a pattern, you need to address the problem. As a manager you're responsible for the safety of your team and drug abuse can jeopardize everyone's well-being. If you suspect that an employee has an addiction there are few steps you need to take. Be sure to:

**Observe and record.** Managers aren't expected to diagnose personal problems but rather ensure that their team members reach certain standards of work quality. A drug addiction will typically affect that person's ability to meet expectations. Every time the employee is absent, fails to show up on time, or does not meet a deliverable, write it down. Make sure you're specific, maintain regular performance and attendance records and are objective. In other words, document your observations but don't include your suspicions and, whatever you do, do not share with other employees or gossip. You can use these notes as a reference point when you talk to your employee and to help support your concerns.

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### Recognize the Problem

Spotting the signs of substance abuse early and quickly may not only give employees the push they need to get help but can also save your company valuable resources. This can be trickier than you think because the early signs of a drug problem often overlap with performance issues you deal with regularly as a manager. Be on the lookout for warning signs that cause changes in:

**Mood.** Irritable, depressed, suspicious, withdrawn or excessively talkative behaviour changes after lunch or breaks.

**Appearance.** Inappropriately dressed, bloodshot eyes, slurred speech, poor hygiene, excessive weight gain or loss, hand tremors and an unsteady stance.

**Work performance.** Low productivity, poor quality of work, loss of concentration, inability to make decisions, resistance to authority, misuse of equipment and frequent breaks, sick days or tardiness.

**Relationships.** Bad listening skills, uncooperative, over-confident, argumentative, accusative and discussion of problems at home.

Be aware that any one of these symptoms can point to problems other than drug abuse. Physical or mental illnesses, increased stress or lack of sleep can all cause similar responses. Also, make sure you consult your leaders and/or human resource department before taking any action.

*As a manager, you need to be ready to recognize the signs, confront the issues and offer your compassion and help.*

These tips will help me support my team.



**Have a discussion.** You need to sit down and talk to your employee in a private room away from other colleagues. Make sure there's another manager/supervisor or leader in the room to witness the conversation and to document it. Share your observations with your team member but don't say that you suspect they're using a substance. Instead refer to specific instances—"I noticed you lost your temper twice this week..." or, "Your past three weekly reports have been incomplete and full of typos." If you've had previous discussions about this kind of behaviour before, recap what was covered and any actions you both had agreed to take at that time. Keep in mind that you're having this conversation to discuss performance concerns and not to accuse the employee of an addiction or to reveal your suspicions. Set an example and remain calm without ever getting emotional, threatening, angry or accusative.

**Listen and respond.** Give your employee a chance to explain their behaviour. Health conditions and many mental health problems can cause similar reactions. If your employee tells you they have a drug problem, then you need to involve your leaders, HR team, union rep and/or occupational health expert. This is particularly important if the employee works in a position where there is a threat to personal safety or the safety of others. If the worker continues to deny the problem, but productivity does not improve, you will have reasonable grounds to reprimand or terminate.

**Agree on the action.** You need to encourage your employee to get help, but remember that you're not there to counsel or prescribe solutions—leave that up to the professionals. You should, however, direct the worker to company assistance programs or provide a list of community agencies that can support your worker. Once your employee has agreed to get help, make sure it's documented and, depending on how big the problem is, agree on a follow-up date to review their progress.

While you likely know it's against the law to discriminate someone with a disability, you may not be aware that addiction to a substance is considered a disability in many jurisdictions. So firing someone for having an addiction, in many cases, can actually violate that person's human rights and is against the law. It will also discourage other employees with problems from coming forward, fearing their own job security. You need to encourage your worker to get help and, when appropriate, should consider moving them to a temporary position where other people's safety isn't jeopardized.

If you don't have one already, make sure your organization has a formal drug and alcohol policy and that all employees are aware of it. Always keep in mind that you can't accuse someone of abusing alcohol or drugs, even if there's overwhelming evidence to support it. If you do, you're putting yourself and your company at risk for legal action. As a manager you need to be ready to recognize the signs, confront the issues and offer your compassion and help. While it may not be an easy situation to handle, ignoring it could put others at risk, jeopardize your organization's reputation and further complicate the situation.

## Unfit for Duty

If an employee is visibly intoxicated at work, that person is a safety risk to themselves and others. You must take action and remove the worker from the workplace. If you suspect an employee is under the influence and on the job, follow these steps:

- Approach the employee and observe how they respond and behave.
- If you still think the worker is under the influence, ask the employee to accompany you to a private area away from colleagues.
- Make sure another supervisor, union rep or HR professional is in the room as a witness.
- Instead of telling the worker that they look intoxicated, say that you've noticed that they're not responding quickly or seem to be slurring words.
- Give the employee the opportunity to explain their behaviour or admit that they're under the influence.
- If intoxicated, tell them that they must leave the office or job site immediately as they're a risk to the whole team's safety.
- Arrange for the employee to be taken home so they don't drive—if they refuse and get behind the wheel you're required to call the police.