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The Supervisor's Tough Job: Dealing with Drug and Alcohol Abusers

PART I

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This article is made up of two sections. **PART I** discusses “*The Impact of Alcohol and Drug Abuse in the Workplace.*” It describes the trends in workplace drug use and the challenges supervisors face in dealing with this problem. **PART II** provides “*Information to Help Supervisors Deal with Drug Abusers.*” It will help them identify the physical and psychological effects of substance abuse and describes appropriate steps to be taken when substance abuse appears to be a problem.

PART I - Substance Abuse: A Threat to Everyone

As everyone knows, drug and alcohol abuse is a critical threat to U.S. society today, costing billions of dollars and causing countless health and social problems. In industry, substance abuse is both an economic and a safety threat. It hampers a firm's productivity, security and employee morale. It also significantly increases the number and severity of accidents and injuries. Statistically, the problem continues to grow in both the workplace and our communities.

Substance abuse also personally affects front line supervisors and managers, making an already challenging job more difficult. It's no easy task to meet production requirements, maintain schedules, do the paperwork and stay within budget—all the while monitoring and managing a variety of personalities and skill levels. These tasks are difficult enough to accomplish when the people you supervise are hard working and have all their physical and mental faculties. But individuals under the influence of drugs or alcohol do not. They seriously threaten a supervisor's ability to get the job done right, and to maintain a safe work environment for everyone.

According to one research study, as many as 23% of a firm's employees abuse alcohol or drugs at work. In the construction trades, estimates run as high as 40%. A Gallup poll in Washington State revealed that 34% of employees polled were aware of on-the-job drug use by co-workers. You may not find these figures realistic, but a leading expert on this topic warns us, "Business can no longer say, 'I don't have a drug problem.' If you employ people, you have a drug problem." In fact, most abusers are not hard core addicts. They are employed, they use their paychecks to buy their drug of choice, and they often sell drugs to co-workers or others they meet on the job. If questioned, most users will say, "I don't know any 'pushers,' I get my drugs from friends."

Some people may think drugs pose less of a problem today than they did in the 60's and 70's. But according to the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration, in calendar year 2000 an estimated 14.0 million Americans were current illicit drug users. 77% were employed either full time or part time. And what about working alongside drug or alcohol impaired co-workers? Lapses in attention, carelessness, and ignored warning signals greatly increase the potential for accidents—to everyone on the crew. Research tells us that even typical "recreational" drug users are five times more likely to injury themselves or another person in a workplace accident than a non-drug user.

No Company Is Immune from the Drug* Abuse Problem

We tend to think of drug abusers as the "losers," the "dopers," the "street people" we see on TV and in newspaper stories, but this problem exists at all levels of society. A 1988 National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) survey of 18-40 year old men, revealed that workers in the following occupations acknowledged having used illicit drugs *at least* once during the previous month:

- * 21.9% of blue-collar workers in construction & repair industries
- * 20.9% of financial professionals
- * 20.4% of doctors, lawyers, accountants

Researchers considered these statistics to be conservative, and they do not include the data on heavy alcohol use. Reports like these make it clear that no organization is immune to this problem. Only *one* such worker in a crew, or leadership position, can affect morale, safety and productivity. Remember too, that *nice* people may become drug dependent--and in need of help. Often their most effective source of assistance is the company they work for. **Note:** *When the term "drugs" alone is used in this article, it will generally refer to both drugs and alcohol.*

The Supervisor's Dilemma

Supervisors play the key role in solving this problem, but often have little preparation for handling it. It may be easy to deal with workers who are obviously "under the influence," and can be taken off the job. But when you aren't sure—if you suspect but can't quite *prove* substance abuse--situations become complex and sensitive.

Have you ever felt you needed to confront a worker about substance abuse but kept putting it off -- for fear of being misunderstood, or being wrong? If you accuse an innocent person--showing mistrust--things might get hostile, or at least very uncomfortable. It's natural to fear making a mistake, and easy to postpone a confrontation.

Have you ever been so concerned with an employee's suspected drug or alcohol abuse that your attention was pulled from other employees and work tasks? Overheard rumors may be inconsistent and confusing, so you don't know what to believe. And employees who are having personal problems may offer these as an excuse for poor work performance. Is kindness and understanding the best approach? Not likely, if the real problem is alcohol or drugs!

Substance abusers are masters of manipulation. Broken promises, denial of wrongdoing, making excuses and blaming others are well-practiced survival skills. No wonder supervisors often doubt their own perceptions when dealing with such people.

On the other hand, perhaps you *know* some members of the crew are “hot,” but feel there’s nothing you can do about it. Unions sometimes fight against drug testing, workers argue for civil liberties and freedom of privacy. Even if your company has a pre-employment drug-testing program, if most of the workforce was hired before the program began, they weren’t tested. Even when you want to control the problem, these are just some of the barriers you face.

There ARE Strategies That Work

It’s naive to think there will ever be a simple answer to this problem, but strategies exist to greatly control it. Long before marijuana, cocaine and hallucinogens became drugs of choice--when alcohol abuse seemed to be the major problem--we learned something important about addiction. People will give up friends, family, cars and houses before they give up their jobs. A regular paycheck provides them with a supply of what they need. Having a job seems to be important for self-esteem and greater freedom to make choices. This may not be the case for hard core addicts, but most workplace alcohol and drug users are not true addicts--yet. Therapists have long known that workplace intervention is sometimes the only effective method of controlling an individual’s substance abuse. A few employers learned this long ago and took action with screening policies and counseling programs. Government regulations the late 1980s further identified, supported--and even mandated--such strategies.

The Omnibus Drug Act Starts a Trend

As part of the *War on Drugs*, the Drug Free Workplace Act of 1988 required pre-hire drug testing programs for all contractors and subcontractors on federally funded projects. At the same time, the Department of Defense required drug testing for military hardware contractors and anyone with access to classified information. The Department of Transportation also required physical examinations and drug tests in order to obtain a commercial driving license. These standards were based on the belief that drug and alcohol impaired employees adversely affect both the safety and productivity of the workforce, and ultimately on the economy, which should not be tolerated on federally funded projects.

DOT Regulations Added Alcohol Testing in 1995

On January 1, 1995 the Department of Transportation expanded testing requirements for DOT regulated employers with more than fifty employees, pre-empting State and local laws or regulations. The new regulation added pre-hire alcohol testing as well as drug testing to existing requirements. Testing was required pre-hire, post-accident, randomly for a fixed percentage of employees, and for reasonable suspicion. Return-to-duty testing and follow-up testing for stipulated drivers was also required. Education and training to be provided for drivers and supervisors is described in the regulations, along with procedures for referral and treatment. Employers with less than fifty employees were required to implement these programs beginning on January 1, 1996. It was all spelled out very clearly.

The addition of alcohol testing to DOT standards seems reasonable, considering the fact that alcohol is said to be involved in over 50% of vehicle accidents. Commercial drivers should not be contributing to these statistics. And despite the greater attention given to illegal drugs, alcohol is known to be the most commonly abused substance in our society. There are more than 12 million alcoholics in this country--many of whom report for work on a regular basis.

Drug Testing Grows In the Private Sector Too

Studies show that in 1981, only 3% of the companies polled conducted drug tests. Ten years later, in 1991, it was estimated that more than half of major U.S. corporations have policies that include testing, and the percentage is rising. As another indicator, the Seattle based Laboratory of Pathology conducted no employee drug testing at all in 1985; ten years later, it conducted employee drug testing for 5,000 companies in the U.S. and Guam, with business growing rapidly. And this is just one of 77 certified testing laboratories in the country.

There seems to be two reasons more companies are drug testing today: (1) Management’s awareness has increased and they believe they have substance abuse in their workforce, or (2) they don’t want to hire cast-offs from other firms which

do have such programs. Many SeaBright policyholders have experienced a significant reduction in accidents and claims after instituting a drug abuse control program that includes pre-hire testing. Most likely word gets around as to which companies test and which don't, so drug users know where to apply.

Laboratory Tests Aren't All that is Needed

Substance abuse prevention programs can take many forms--simple to complex. Smaller firms, with fewer, well-known employees, may feel a management policy statement and pre-hire testing of new applicants is adequate. In many cases, however, a more comprehensive program is needed. Critical elements in an effective workplace drug and alcohol prevention program include:

1. Development of a written management policy that clearly states why drugs are unacceptable, why testing is necessary, and how the program will be managed.
2. The company's legal counsel should review the policy to determine if it is within legal guidelines, and to assure the plan complies with employment or union contracts.
3. Determine drug and alcohol testing/screening procedures to be used, considering issues of privacy, confidentiality, liability, and test validity. Types, frequency and schedules for testing must be established, e.g., pre-hire, re-hire, post accident, for cause, etc.
4. The company should inform employees of the program's content and purpose, and how it will affect them. Education on drugs and alcohol should be provided to the workforce.
5. Supervisors and managers should be trained. They should become familiar with common drugs and understand the relationship between drug abuse and problems it may cause. They should understand how the company policy will be carried out, including their role in monitoring work performance, identifying and referring problem employees.
6. Determine the role of rehabilitation and therapy. Establish an in-house Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or locate support programs and treatment centers in the community. Investigate if the health insurance program covers drug and alcohol rehabilitation services.
7. In union shops, union review and/or input may be a necessary part of contract negotiations.

Supervisors Make the Program Work

If a company chooses to do only pre-hire testing, this can be handled by outside contractors, once policies and procedures have been established. For effective drug abuse control to work, however, supervisors must be adequately trained in the necessary knowledge and skills they need to observe, monitor and deal with potential problem employees. They need to be able to identify performance problems that may be drug or alcohol related.

Companies that do not train their supervisors on this topic seem to make the assumption that all drug and alcohol abusers have been screened out when hired and never develop a substance abuse problem. But this may not be a wise assumption. An American Management Association survey of more than 1100 questionnaires and interviews with Fortune 100 companies supports supervisor training. The study suggests that training supervisors to spot and confront workplace drug abusers more be a more effective way to curtail substance abusers than urinalysis testing. The survey showed that referrals to drug rehabilitation programs triple if the company has a training program for supervisors.

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THE IMPACT OF DRUG & ALCOHOL ABUSE ON BUSINESS & INDUSTRY



- A typical “recreational” drug user compared to a non-drug user in today’s workforce:**
 - Is 2.2 times more likely to request early dismissal or time off.
 - Is 2.5 times more likely to have absences of eight days or more.
 - Is 3 times more likely to injury himself or herself or another person in a workplace accident.
 - Is 5 times more likely to file a workers’ compensation claim.
 - Is 33% less productive.
- Additional substantial, but difficult to calculate, costs include:**
 - Lowered moral.
 - Decreased product quality and service.
 - Destruction of company property.
 - Higher insurance rates.
 - Stolen money or property from the company or co-workers.
 - Impaired judgment regarding decisions affecting the company.
- A recent survey of drug users who were seeking help in regard to their drug habits revealed:**
 - 75% had used drugs on the job.
 - 44% had sold drugs to other employees.
 - 18% had stolen from co-workers to support their habits.
- 65% of persons entering the full-time workforce for the first time have illegally used drugs.**
- Three-fourths of those calling a cocaine hotline said they sometimes took cocaine on the job; one-fourth said they used it on the job daily.**
- 12 million Americans are alcoholics. Up to 40% of industrial fatalities and 47% of industrial injuries are related to alcohol abuse. Workplace accident rates are two or three times higher than normal for alcoholics.**

This statistical information and more can be found in the publication titled, *Drug Abuse in the Workplace: An Employer’s Guide for Prevention*, offered by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.