

Staff Drug & Alcohol Problems: How to Act, Not Hide - By Ken Burgin

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Can't we just wait for the problem to go away?

It won't, and in the meantime you've got a business and staff to protect. Chances are they knew about this problem before you did - now they're watching to see how you deal with it.

You need support from your colleagues and medical professionals. What was unknown a few years ago (ice, crystal etc) is now widespread, and some people argue the violence of alcohol abuse is worse than being 'out of it' on illegal party drugs. There are many opinions, plus legal and leadership issues - is your staff manual up to date? Your management team would benefit enormously by meeting with a local drug & alcohol counsellor to find out how they work.

If a problem arises, follow a process...

1. Meet with the employee privately. Take notes of the meeting, and keep them confidential - no time for gossip.
2. Be respectful, and stay calm. You're probably upset and confronted, and your skill as a manager is shown by how you don't let your anger cloud your handling of the issue.
3. Focus on the behaviour that's deteriorated, giving times, dates and examples. This is not the time for probing why things have gone wrong - that's for the counsellor.
4. Focus on safety - it's a high priority in most employment training and policy, and helps you to keep the discussion on factual issues.
5. Don't make threats unless you're prepared to carry them out. It should be clear that further discipline and dismissal is possible if performance does not improve, and change must take place within an agreed time. Be aware that what you think is just bad behaviour could be regarded as a 'disability' in some legal systems - don't avoid action, but how you act may need professional advice.
6. Be ready with information about local drug and alcohol support. There's a wide range of services available, in forms appropriate for the person's age and cultural identity - search Google for "drug and alcohol counselling".
7. Don't be attached to 'saving' the person. They won't change unless they want to, and that may not be while they work for you. Or maybe a breakthrough will come about, because you've taken a stand and no-one has before.

What's likely to happen in the interview?

1. This is not the first time the substance abuser has been caught or confronted. They know if you're bluffing, or nervous, from how you handle other discipline issues.
2. They deny there's a problem, and may accuse you or other staff of being out to get them. There may be tears - stay calm, focusing on the performance issues and the facts.
3. They make threats - to see a lawyer, make a scene, or quit and leave you in a mess. Remind them that of course they have all these choices, but your responsibility is to uphold workplace policies and find a solution that will benefit the business, themselves and other employees. Be ready to ask for help if threats are likely, and make sure there are other people in the vicinity.
4. They get angry, yelling and carrying on to scare you and make you drop the issue. Stay calm, give them time to cool down, then continue where you left off. The meeting may need to be rescheduled for another time.
5. They make excuses, some of which may be very plausible: 'You've had me working such long shifts lately that I've needed something to help me get through'. Stay focused on their work performance, and let them know you will be offering help from professional counsellors, but the abuse of drugs and alcohol has to stop.
6. The problem is not fixed instantly. You've done what you can, and may feel shaken and ineffective. But you've acted with integrity and have the best interests of the workplace as your priority.

There will be a next time when you have to handle this issue - what needs to change so you're more prepared?

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