



Working Drug-Free Works



U.S. Department of Labor

Working Partners
for an Alcohol and Drug-Free Workplace



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Trabajando sin drogas *siempre trabaja!*



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First-Line Fact Sheet

Keeping Your Worksite Drug and Alcohol Free

When a worker is impaired by the use of drugs or alcohol, he or she threatens the safety and well-being of everyone at a worksite. While it is the responsibility of every employee to work drug free, supervisors can be the first line of defense by taking appropriate action when a worker may be impaired.

Understanding Drug-Free Workplace Policies

Implementing and enforcing a drug-free workplace policy is one important way employers can protect worker safety and health. Though policies may vary from one worksite to the next, prohibitions against drinking alcohol or using illicit drugs during or prior to reporting to work are becoming standard practice in many workplaces.

The goal of these policies is to prevent impairment and improve safety by setting standards and holding workers accountable. Some policies include drug testing, while others do not; and some offer treatment and one or more chances to get help. But no matter how a program is structured, all policies are intended to protect workers and promote safe workplaces.

As a supervisor, it is your job to familiarize yourself with your company's drug-free workplace policy and be able to explain it to others. In addition, you must ensure that your workers understand their responsibility to:

- Know your company's drug-free workplace policy;
- Follow it and set a good example for others;
- Seek help if they or their co-workers need it; and
- Notify you/management if they observe drug or alcohol use or impairment that threatens safety.

Signs That Drug or Alcohol Use is Becoming a Safety or Health Hazard at Work

Supervisors can play a powerful role in improving workplace safety by intervening and encouraging workers with alcohol or drug problems to seek help. But just how can you tell whether a worker is misusing drugs or alcohol?

Both on and off the job, symptoms of alcohol or drug use may be **physical** (chills, smell of alcohol, sweating, weight loss, physical deterioration); **emotional** (increased

aggression, anxiety, burnout, denial, depression, paranoia); and/or **behavioral** (excessive talking, impaired coordination, irritability, lack of energy, limited attention span, poor motivation).

While different types of drugs produce different physical symptoms or behaviors, there are numerous ways that misuse affects work behavior—and ultimately job performance and safety. It could be a sign of a drug or alcohol problem if a worker is:

- Arriving late, leaving early and/or often absent.
- Unreliable and often away from assigned job.
- Careless and repeatedly making mistakes.
- Argumentative and uncooperative.
- Unwilling or unable to follow directions.
- Avoiding responsibilities.
- Making excuses that are unbelievable or placing blame elsewhere.
- Taking unnecessary risks by ignoring safety and health procedures.
- Frequently involved in mishaps and accidents or responsible for damage to equipment or property.

It is important to note that if an employee displays these signs, *it does not necessarily mean he/she has a drug or alcohol problem, but the possibility should not be overlooked.*

Supervisor Roles and Responsibilities

Because you have day-to-day responsibility over what goes on in the workplace, you play a critical role in enforcing your employer's drug-free workplace policy. However, you are not expected to perform the role of police officer or counselor. Since it is part of your job to assess employees' job performance to ensure that all necessary tasks are completed in accordance with specifications and deadlines, your primary role in enforcing the policy is to be observant.

When an employee begins to show a consistent pattern of problem behavior, you should take action. Focusing on job performance, even when you think the problem may be caused by drugs or alcohol, allows you to balance both the rights of the individual employee to privacy and fair treatment and the rights of the work group to a safe, secure and productive environment.

What to Do When You Suspect Drug or Alcohol Misuse

Do not wait until someone gets hurt to address a worker's drug or alcohol misuse. And, no matter how badly you want to shield your workers from disciplinary action, you should not make the problem worse by covering up or making excuses for someone whose use has impaired their job performance. If you suspect a worker has a problem, follow company guidelines, which may include these steps:

- Start documenting evidence of declining job performance. List specific incidents (include date and time) and be concrete about what job functions/responsibilities were affected.
- Share this documentation with the appropriate company or union official who is qualified to advise you on how to handle the situation (this could be a shop steward, employee assistance professional, human resources manager, substance abuse program administrator, etc.).
- Meet with the employee and tell him/her that you are concerned about his/her job performance. Describe specific incidents and problems using your documentation as a guide.
- Ask the employee if he/she has any explanation for the problem. Offer the opportunity to make the connection between alcohol/drug use and performance, but don't accuse the employee—unless you have “reasonable suspicion” and are going to require a drug test (see following *Note*).
- Define what must be done to correct the performance problem and specify the consequences for the employee if the problem is not corrected.
- Refer the employee for professional assistance if he/she has admitted that drug or alcohol use is the root cause of the performance problem. Even if the employee has not admitted he/she has a problem, reconfirm your concern and suggest he/she seek assistance since personal problems—including, but not limited to, alcohol and drug use—are often the root causes of these types of job performance issues.
- Set a time frame for improvement and be willing and able to follow through on your promises about consequences.

Note: There may be instances where there is concrete evidence that a worker is using drugs or alcohol and is impaired by recent use—these should not be ignored. If you directly observe a clear policy violation and/or unsafe behavior that may pose an imminent threat, company management should be notified. The worker may need to be removed from the site and/or sent for a reasonable suspicion drug test. (*“Reasonable suspicion” is defined as a belief that an employee is using or has used drugs in violation of the employer’s policy drawn from specific, objective and articulable facts and reasonable inferences drawn from those facts in light of experience.*) Be sure you know your company’s procedures (if any) for having an employee tested and consult with human resources or other designated company management prior to confronting the employee.

Sources of Help

When a worker has a problem with alcohol or drugs, company employee assistance or union member or labor assistance programs are generally the best places to turn for help since they provide confidential services. If these are not available, supervisors might want to consider calling a local drug and alcohol treatment provider who may be able to help determine whether some type of treatment intervention is advisable and, if so, how to get the worker to consider accepting help. Some free and confidential resources include:

- **Substance Abuse Treatment Locator**
1-800-662-HELP
www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov
- **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)**
(212) 870-3400
www.aa.org
- **Narcotics Anonymous**
(818) 773-9999
www.na.org
- **Al-Anon**
1-888-4AL-ANON
www.al-anon.alateen.org
- **National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence Hopeline**
1-800-NCA-CALL
www.ncadd.org

For more information, visit the U.S. Department of Labor's Working Partners for an Alcohol- and Drug-Free Workplace Web site. Located at www.dol.gov/workingpartners, it helps employers establish drug-free workplace programs that protect worker safety and health.