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Uncovering the Hidden Signs of Workplace Substance Abuse

Tom Warner couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he knew something in his company was not right. In fact, he recognized that something was very "weird" about the way his employees were performing.

Warner, president of the Warner Corporation, a plumbing, heating, and air conditioning services company in the Washington, D.C. area, described the situation as a series of "stupid" mistakes by experienced plumbers and assistants who couldn't handle simple responsibilities. However, when Warner discovered how prevalent workplace substance abuse is, he began to suspect that drug abuse was at the heart of his employees' problems.

"When I learned that statistics show 20 percent of our population uses drugs - and that in the Washington, D.C. area, at least 20 percent of the work force uses drugs every day - things started to make sense," Warner says.

In response, Warner's company implemented a comprehensive substance abuse program for its employees. This program included the development of a thorough policy statement that strictly prohibits workers from abusing alcohol and prescription drugs and from using illegal drugs. Today, the program also includes drug testing and counseling for troubled workers who self-refer through the company's employee assistance program.

Taking Its Toll

The substance abuse problems experienced by the Warner Corporation are not unique to this company, its industry, or even its geographic location. The unfortunate truth is that substance abuse - the abuse of alcohol and legal drugs and the use of illegal drugs - is more common today than it has been for the last several years.

According to the federal government, 71 percent of all illegal drug users are employed, an increase of 5 percent since 1992. As a result, substance abuse is taking a tremendous toll on employers' ability to stay in business. This trend is particularly apparent among smaller companies that, for a variety of reasons, have been slow to address the problem.

How exactly do substance-abusing employees cost their employers? Consider the following: employees who abuse drugs are less likely to show up to work on time or put in a productive day's work. Conversely, they are more likely to be absent from work without a legitimate reason, use their health care benefits, and file workers' compensation claims.

According to the National Council on Compensation Insurance, as many as 50 percent of all workers' compensation claims are related to the abuse of alcohol or drugs in the workplace. Drug users, as a group, use medical benefits at a rate 8 times higher than non-users. Substance abusing employees also are absent from work more often than their non-substance abusing co-workers, often resulting in increased workloads for co-workers and decreased employee morale.

Though the total cost of substance abuse in the workplace is difficult to assess, Marsh & McLennan Companies estimates the national figure to be \$75 billion per year or about \$640 per employee, whether user or non-user.

The Signs

Unfortunately, once employers begin to see the dollars leaking out of their bottom line, it is often late in the development of a serious substance abuse problem. Can this be avoided? Can employers look for signs of possible substance abuse? Are there hidden signs that might warn employers that a problem is developing?

The answer to all three of these questions is yes. In most cases, many of the long-term problems associated with workplace substance abuse can be avoided if employers are constantly on the lookout for the hidden signs of substance abuse and take appropriate action. However, it is also important to recognize that an employee's declining job performance may be caused by factors unrelated to substance abuse.

Supervisors should be trained to measure each worker's job performance and to refer employees with performance problems to the appropriate qualified professional to determine the nature of the problem.

Performance

There are many ways to measure workers' performance. These indicators can also help employers spot potential substance abuse problems early on. Is a certain employee's quality of work inconsistent? Is the employee's work pace slow, slower than usual, or sporadic? Does the employee have trouble concentrating on his work? Are there signs of fatigue?

Other telling performance signs include increased mistakes, errors in judgment, and a sudden inability to fulfill complex assignments or meet deadlines.

Increased absenteeism or tardiness, both of which have a direct impact on the performance of the troubled employee and the co-workers who have to carry the extra workload, also could indicate that a substance abuse problem exists.

Other performance-related signs of substance abuse may include:

- Excessive sick leave
- Frequent early departures
- Patterns of absenteeism (Mondays, Fridays, before or after holidays, and following paydays)
- Extended coffee breaks

Excessive time on the phone

Behavior and Appearance

Workers who display sudden changes in behavior on the job may be trying to hide a substance abuse problem. For example, irritability, moodiness, arguing with co-workers, or insubordination toward supervisors are not uncommon among substance abusers.

For substance abusing employees, personal appearance may lose its usual importance. Troubled workers will often show up to work looking sloppy, unkempt, unshaven, or dressed inappropriately (i.e., long sleeved shirts in the summer, sunglasses indoors, etc.).

Also, employers may begin receiving complaints from customers, clients, and co-workers regarding the attitudes and work quality of substance abusing employees.

Other behavior-related signs of substance abuse may include:

- Sleepiness
- Slurred speech
- Unsteady movements and shaky hands
- Cold, sweaty palms
- Dilated pupils
- Red eyes
- Unusual weight loss or gain
- Smell of alcohol on breath
- Deteriorating family relationships
- Borrowing money from co-workers
- Stealing from the company and co-workers
- Sudden change in choice of friends
- Poor personal hygiene
- Violent behavior
- Impatience
- Depression
- Suspicious attitude toward others
- Emotional behavior
- Excessive talkativeness

Safety Hazards

Substance abusing employees are not safe employees. Depending on the type of work employees do, substance abuse problems can begin manifesting themselves in employee safety records. Substance abusing employees will be involved in more accidents than other workers, even though they are often not the ones who are injured. They also tend to display carelessness in the operation and maintenance of potentially hazardous materials or dangerous equipment.

Other safety-related signs of substance abuse may include:

- Risky behavior

Increased involvement in off-the-job accidents
Damaging equipment or property

Conclusion

The most important thing employers can do to help control the cost of substance abuse is to establish and enforce a policy that prohibits employees from using illegal drugs and abusing legal drugs or alcohol. Employers should train supervisors to monitor workers' job performance and to report any irregularities. However, supervisors should not be expected to diagnose possible medical conditions, such as substance abuse. Employers should also offer employees ongoing substance abuse education opportunities so that everyone in the workplace can be on the lookout for the hidden signs of substance abuse.

As for Tom Warner, it wasn't long before his company began reaping the benefits of its substance abuse program. In fact, Warner credits the program with saving the company at least \$385,000 in one year due to fewer accidents, which in turn resulted in lower workers' compensation costs and vehicle insurance premiums.

Warner says, "Companies need to establish drug testing and drug abuse policies, make them known, and enforce them vigorously and without exception."

U.S. Department of Labor



Training Supervisors: A Critical Link in a Successful Substance Abuse Prevention Program

On August 28, 1991, a New York subway operator crashed his train near a station in lower Manhattan. Tragically, five people were killed and more than 200 others were injured. After the accident the operator was tested for drugs and alcohol. He tested positive for alcohol with a blood alcohol content level of .21, more than twice the legal limit in the state of New York.

The next day the *New York Times* ran a story that quoted two of the operator's supervisors who admitted that they knew the man had a substance abuse problem, but they didn't know what to do about it.

Supervisors and managers are critical links between the implementation of a workplace substance abuse program and its successful maintenance. Without their commitment to the program, your objectives - a safe, healthy work force, and a more productive and profitable business - will go unrealized. However, for supervisors to demonstrate solid commitment to the program they must first understand what the program is, what it requires, and their role - they must be trained.

Many of the problems encountered when implementing and maintaining a substance abuse workplace program can be avoided if you have the full support and participation of your supervisors and managers. In concert with employee drug education, a thorough, ongoing supervisor training program will support your company's policy statement and, if included, make your drug testing and employee assistance programs more effective.

Where to Start

The first step in beginning a training program is to consider what you want to accomplish. An effective training program should allow supervisors to do the following:

- Know the company's policy and understand their role in its implementation and maintenance.

- Observe and document unsatisfactory job performance.

- Confront workers about unsatisfactory job performance according to company procedures.

- Understand and be able to recognize the effects of substance abuse in the workplace.

- Know how to refer an employee suspected of having a substance abuse problem to those who are qualified to make a specific diagnosis and to offer assistance.

Supervisors' Role

Supervisors are generally in the best position to know if one of your employees is having a performance problem. Of course, the problem may be caused by any number of reasons, one of which could be substance abuse. The important point for supervisors to understand is that the company does not expect them to diagnose substance abuse

problems. Rather, supervisors are responsible for monitoring job performance and, when a problem arises, follow established company procedures.

Supervisors cannot afford to get involved emotionally in workers' problems; to do so could compromise their ability to effectively deal with the troubled employees. Also, supervisors should be trained not to enable substance abuse problems to continue by looking the other way, lying and covering up for workers, failing to document performance problems, or choosing to not confront employees directly.

The Signs of Substance Abuse

The signs and symptoms of substance abuse are sometimes identical to those of other performance problems such as marital, family, financial or gambling. Nonetheless, supervisors should be trained to recognize these symptoms and know that they could be related to substance abuse.

Generally, these signs and symptoms may be reflected by changes in performance, behavior and appearance, and safety. Performance issues may involve an employee's quality of work, work pace, ability to follow instructions, and successful completion of assignments. Supervisors should look for mistakes, errors in judgment, inability to meet deadlines, sick leave usage, and absenteeism patterns (e.g., Mondays, Fridays, following paydays, etc.).

Sudden behavioral changes may be a sign that an employee is experiencing personal problems. Supervisors should be on the alert for employees who are irritable, moody, argumentative with co-workers, or insubordinate. Troubled workers may lose interest in their appearance or begin receiving complaints about their attitude or appearance from customers, clients, co-workers, or other supervisors.

Unsafe behavior on the job should always be addressed immediately. Substance abusing workers tend to be involved in more accidents than their co-workers, though they are not always the ones injured. Careless or other risky behavior needs to be addressed before an accident occurs.

All such signs and symptoms should be identified and documented.

Who to Turn To

For supervisors to effectively carry out your substance abuse policy, there must be a source of help to which they can turn. Who provides that help may depend on the size of the company and how you have set up your program. For example, if your company has few employees, problems may be referred directly to you as the employer. If you have an internal or outside employee assistance service, supervisors would be instructed to refer matters to that person.

In some companies, supervisors may routinely work with the manager of personnel or safety to address workplace problems. There are numerous ways in which companies choose to deal with substance abuse problems. Regardless of the approach, supervisors must document their observations and efforts to ensure that appropriate action has been taken.

Who Can Perform the Training?

Supervisor training does not necessarily require you to hire an outside consultant. The Federal Government's National Clearinghouse on Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI, 800/729-6686) is an excellent source of free or low-cost materials that can serve as the nucleus of a supervisor training program. Available materials include training manuals, booklets, pamphlets, videos and posters, some of which have been developed specifically for supervisor training.

A supervisor or other management-level employee can review the materials and put together a training program with the assistance of the Workplace Helpline (800/843-4971), a service sponsored by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Local business organizations, police departments, or community resources may also be used to supplement or provide training. Employee assistance professionals typically offer supervisor training services.

Conclusion

There is no way to determine whether supervisors could have prevented the tragic New York subway accident. Well-trained supervisors are not an absolute defense against the problems associated with substance abuse. However, companies that utilize comprehensive programs that include supervisor training generally report fewer positive results in drug tests as compared to companies that just do drug testing.

The level of support your supervisors give to the company's substance abuse program, combined with the fairness of your program and the firmness of your commitment, will generally influence its potential for success.

U.S. Department of Labor



Workplace Helpline



Helpline: 1-800-843-4971

The Workplace Helpline is a toll-free resource for business owners, supervisors and managers, and union leaders to call for assistance in developing and maintaining a workplace substance abuse program. The Helpline, which is operated by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, a component of the Department of Health and Human Services, also distributes materials regarding policy development, Federal regulations, drug testing, and other related issues. Counselors can also refer callers to local contacts that can provide direct assistance.

Working Partners for an Alcohol- and Drug-Free Workplace



Working Partners: 202-693-5919

Working Partners is a private- and public sector partnership designed to encourage and assist small businesses in developing and maintaining an alcohol- and drug-free workplace.

At the core of the Working Partners Initiative is a small business workplace kit. The kit contains industry-specific information to help trade association executives understand the nature of the substance abuse problem, how it affects the workplace, and what employers can do to address it. Though the kit is designed specifically for trade associations, many of its contents can be of use to small businesses.

The Small Business Workplace Kit is available to associations and other business groups at no cost. Individual businesses may order copies of materials from the kit by contacting NCADI (see below).

The Working Partners Program can also provide other services to trade and business groups such as presentations to staff and program members including a demonstration of SAID, articles for newsletters and magazines, and assistance in identifying speakers for conferences and meetings.

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)



NCADI and RADAR: 1-800-729-6686

NCADI is another service offered by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. NCADI, or the "Clearinghouse" as it is often referred to, is a national resource for substance abuse information in written and videotape formats.

NCADI provides information on substance abuse as it relates to families, youth, communities, schools, women and minorities, and the workplace. The information includes research results, articles from popular press and scholarly journals, videotapes, prevention curricula, print materials, program descriptions, and state-level contacts. Most Federal agencies active on the substance abuse issue make their materials available through the Clearinghouse.

The Regional Alcohol and Drug Awareness Resource (RADAR) Network works in partnership with NCADI and consists of a state clearinghouse, specialized organizational information centers, the U.S. Department of Education Regional Training Centers, and other information sources.

U.S. Department of Labor



Contact the following organizations if you or someone you know needs help or more information about alcohol abuse or alcoholism:

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters

1600 Corporate Landing Parkway

Virginia Beach, VA 23454-5617

Internet address: <http://www.al-anon.alateen.org>

Makes referrals to local Al-Anon groups, which are support groups for spouses and other significant adults in an alcoholic person's life. Also makes referrals to Alateen groups, which offer support to children of alcoholics.

Locations of Al-Anon or Alateen meetings worldwide can be obtained by calling (888) 4AL-ANON (425-2666) Monday through Friday, 8 a.m.-6 p.m. (e.s.t.)

Free informational materials can be obtained by calling (757) 563-1600, Monday through Friday, 8a.m.-6 p.m.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) World Services

475 Riverside Drive, 11th Floor

New York, NY 10115

Phone: (212) 870-3400

Internet address: <http://www.aa.org>

Makes referrals to local AA groups and provides informational materials on the AA program. Many cities and towns also have a local AA office listed in the telephone book.

National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA)

11426 Rockville Pike, Suite 100

Rockville, MD 20852

Phone: (888) 55-4COAS or (301) 468-0985

E-mail: nacoa@nacoa.org

Internet address: <http://www.nacoa.net>

Works on behalf of children of alcohol- and drug-dependent parents.

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD)

20 Exchange Place, Suite 2902

New York, NY 10005

Phone: (800) 622-2255

Internet address: <http://www.ncadd.org>

Provides telephone numbers of local NCADD affiliates (who can provide information on local treatment resources) and educational materials on alcoholism via the above toll-free number.

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)

6000 Executive Boulevard, Suite 409

Bethesda, MD 20892-7003

Phone: (301) 443-3860

Internet address: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>