



LifeSolutions

# The Successful Supervisor

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## Confronting substance abuse at work

"I suspect that my employee is using some kind of substance. He often looks spaced out ... I am not sure what to do." "Sometimes when I am near my employee, I think I smell alcohol ... should I say something?" "There is a rumor going around that my employee is on drugs ... what am I supposed to do?" Supervisors are periodically confronted with situations involving possible alcohol or drug usage in the workplace. Often, as in the examples noted above, it is not clear what exactly is going on, and the supervisor may be hesitant to take action. In this month's Successful Supervisor, we will review how to recognize and deal with possible substance abuse issues in the workplace. **Please note that this is a general newsletter. Always check with your organization's HR department and leadership to make sure you are following your specific company policies and processes.** Email EAP at [ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com](mailto:ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com) or contact your EAP account manager at 1-800-647-3327 with any questions or feedback.

Jan Nedin, MBA, MEd, SAP,  
Senior Account Manager EAP  
Licensed Independent Chemical Dependency  
Counselor, DOT Substance Abuse Professional

Supervisors with ongoing direct contact with employees can play a significant role in identifying workers who have substance abuse issues. Many supervisors are uncomfortable confronting an employee about substance abuse. They are equally hesitant to share their suspicions about an employee with a higher level director or HR. Co-workers don't want to get a colleague in trouble, especially if they are not entirely sure there is a problem. As a supervisor, it is important to bring a potentially serious problem to the attention of those who can assess the situation. You should recognize that you may be opening the door for an intervention that could prove to be a lifesaving event for the employee.

### **So, what steps should you take when you suspect an employee is using substances in the workplace?**

- **Check your organization's drug and alcohol policy.** The first step in questionable situations, such as those noted in the opening paragraph, is to consult with your HR department and review the company's drug and alcohol policy. What you are able to do as a manager and what you will do next depends entirely upon what is written in this policy. The policy should clearly delineate the steps you can and should take.

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Most companies have a zero tolerance policy for drugs. They may or may not take a similar stand on alcohol use. For example, some companies may allow up to .02 BAC (blood alcohol count). This level can be present if the employee has had one beer over lunch or drank heavily the night before and still has alcohol in his or her system. Your HR department can clarify this for you.

- **What is reasonable suspicion?**

Managers and supervisors need to understand the concept of “reasonable suspicion.” If you suspect an employee is using drugs or alcohol, you will need to document the behaviors or other signs that would support your suspicion. For example, “Tom returned from lunch looking glassy eyed and his speech was slurred.” You should always ask a manager colleague to observe the employee and document his or her observations as well. If you and the other manager have documented reasons to suspect substance use, then the requirements for “reasonable suspicion” are met. This supports your decision to notify HR. You would then follow the directives you receive on what steps to take next. (Usually it’s having the employee tested for the presence of drugs or alcohol, along with how to go about this and where to take the employee, etc.). Generally an outside lab is used for testing. The employee must be escorted to the lab for the tests; this is for the employee’s safety, liability reasons, and preventing the employee from circumventing or invalidating the testing process.

- **What if the test is positive?**

All labs have an MRO (Medical Review Officer) on staff. If the specimen is positive, the MRO will contact the employee and rule out any extenuating circumstances (e.g., the employee is taking a prescription drug that would give a positive result). Your company will not be notified that the test is positive until the MRO is satisfied that no other valid circumstances were present. By the time you learn that the test is positive, you can trust that the result is valid.

- **What happens when my company is notified of a positive result?**

This depends on how your company’s drug and alcohol policy is written. Many companies will allow the employee to be referred to the EAP for further evaluation and possible referral to education or treatment. Depending on the nature and time demands of the treatment recommended, the employee may or may not be permitted to return to work during the treatment process. In companies that are DOT (Department of Transportation) regulated, the expectations of the employee will be much stricter and more rigid in order to comply with public safety requirements.

If your company policy allows for treatment, you will be notified that the employee will be off work for a period of time. There are some instances where involvement in treatment may not interfere with the employee’s work schedule (for example, attending an educational program in the evenings, or participating in outpatient counseling). **It is always essential that you keep the fact that the employee is in treatment strictly confidential.**

- **What is my role as manager/supervisor when the employee returns to work?**

You should always discuss the employee’s return to work with HR and your own director. Follow any directives they provide. You can also talk with an EAP consultant who can support your efforts to provide a successful re-entry to the workplace. Typically, you will want to sit down with the employee on the first day to welcome him or her back and to allay any anxieties about returning. Assure him or her that you have kept everything confidential with regard to peers and co-workers. It is a good idea to review job duties and reestablish expectations. Demonstrate kindness and compassion ... the returning worker will be adjusting to his or her return to work. The employee may also be dealing with some major life changes such as sobriety or continued involvement in treatment. You also want to make it clear that the employee will be expected to meet job standards to the best of his or her ability, just as you expect other employees to do the same.

- **Will my company continue to be involved after my employee returns to work?**

Again, different companies have different return-to-work policies. We strongly recommend that the company arrange for follow-up random drug testing for the first year. This extra monitoring step may actually help the employee stay clean and sober during that first challenging year. When viewed in that light, this is not a punitive step. It is showing support to reinforce the resolve to stay sober.

If you have any questions along the way, speak with your HR Consultant or contact your EAP Account Manager. This process can sometimes be difficult and confusing ... we are both here to support you.

Stay tuned for our August issue, which will focus on Customer Service. Until then, you can contact *LifeSolutions* at 1-800-647-3327.

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