

## **Alcohol in the workplace**

One of the more recent measures of dealing with alcohol in the workplace has been the implementation of Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs). The presence of alcohol in the workplace is nothing new.

Back in the 1940s attempts were made by Alcoholics Anonymous to address alcohol abuse by forming support groups in the workplace for affected employees. This is the genesis of our modern-day Employee Assistance Programme, which now addresses a myriad number of problems/concerns in the workplace.

The main focus of the Employee Assistance Programme is to support the “troubled” workers and return them to an acceptable level of performance in the shortest possible time.

Alcohol, as we know, is a drug, which means that it can alter the mood or mind of the user. It is therefore important that alcohol users in the workplace be identified and treated. This becomes even more crucial in certain organizations where one mistake can result in tremendous financial loss and sometimes even loss of life.

Early identification and confrontation can be very helpful in addressing the problems of alcohol use by employees. Many companies today, particularly in the energy sector, are implementing drug abuse policies, which guide their handling of such cases.

### **WHAT SUPERVISORS SHOULD LOOK FOR**

Part of the core technology of an EAP is the training of supervisors in the identification of job-performance issues, which may be negatively impacting organizational goals.

Supervisors play perhaps the most crucial role in the success of any EAP and while they not expected to be qualified to judge professionally whether an employee’s unsatisfactory performance is a result of a personal problem as supervisors, however, they must be aware of the performance indicators of a possible problem and know how to deal with it appropriately.

The following are some possible indicators of alcohol abuse: -

- Increased absenteeism and tardiness
- Absenteeism after public holidays and following pay days
- Poor decision-making
- Lowered concentration – increased mistakes
- Frequent, unexplained absences from the work area
- Complaints of vaguely defined illness – flu, stomach ache, headache
- Sloppy, unacceptable work
- Poor personal hygiene
- Inappropriate emotional outbursts

- Conflict with co-workers
- Constantly borrowing money
- Shaky hands
- Smell of alcohol on the breath

Employees demonstrating these signs should be carefully monitored and referred to the EAP or other source in the organization designed to handle such situations. It should be pointed out, however, that not all these signs are necessarily related to alcohol abuse but could possibly be symptomatic of other conditions.

The important fact is that supervisors must set performance standards and be alert to the changes in the job performance of their employees and take appropriate action.

While the article focuses is on the supervisor's role in recognizing employees with a drinking problem, the onus in on all employees to recognize when the actions of their peers may be placing the organization at risk.

Peer referral is an acceptable feature of any EAP. During EAP orientation sessions, employees are usually guided on how to make these referrals. If in doubt, please consult with your EAP provider.