



12 Steps for Building Proactive Company Culture to Address Addiction

What can companies do when an employee, a manager – even an executive or CEO – is found to be addicted to alcohol or other drugs? Here are 12 steps every company can take to deal with employees who have a substance abuse or addiction problem:

1. Candidly Assess Your Company's Beliefs About Addiction Among Your Employees.

Does your company believe employees who are addicted to alcohol or other drugs should be treated the same as employees battling cancer, diabetes or other diseases? Would your company support an intervention if an employee suffered from drug or alcohol addiction? Because of the stigma of addiction and the misbelief that substance abuse is a personal or moral failing, many companies view addicted employees as offenders – rather than as people struggling with a chronic, treatable disease. Decide what steps you can take to lead an addicted employee toward treatment and recovery, rather than termination.

2. Recognize The Extent Of Addiction In Your Workplace.

What is the gap between your company's desire for a drug-free workplace and the reality of current employee performance problems, which could simply mask underlying addiction to alcohol, cocaine, stimulants, sedatives, prescription medication or other drugs? Would a confidential HR survey of your employees reveal far more dependence on alcohol and other mood-altering drugs than you might expect? Is your company training its supervisors to identify the behavioral signs of employees who may be having trouble with alcohol and other drugs, or moving from abuse to addiction?

3. Inform Employees How Your Company Deals With Addiction.

Hazelden urges companies to clearly encourage early intervention and treatment, rather than waiting for a problem to escalate and then relying on punishment and termination. Acknowledge your real-world company's philosophy toward addictive diseases and develop the best way to communicate that to your employees. Explain to employees how your health insurance/benefits package supports addiction treatment and recovery. Assure them that they will not be punished for getting the help they need. State if your company is willing to supply an interventionist to head off a crisis with an addicted employee. Mention what type of leave of absence your company provides to accommodate a completion of inpatient addiction treatment. Openly educate employees about treatment options.

4. Create A Company Culture That Supports Treatment And Recovery.

Erase the stigma of addiction in your workplace. Urge employees to seek help at the earliest possible stage and create a safe environment that encourages coworkers to intervene rather than ignore the signs of addiction. Provide support for the workgroup - supervisor, coworkers, employees, support staff - who may be dealing with an employee's addiction, reassuring them they did the right thing to get involved. Help facilitate intervention. Addicted employees are often afraid to take advantage of official drug treatment resources, including employer-paid health insurance, so consider the value of giving your employees access to an anonymous, independently-run help line or Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

5. Balance Discipline With The Hope Of Treatment And Recovery.

Companies should balance two tracks when dealing with addicted employees. The first is a potential disciplinary track, which could lead to serious consequences including termination, and the second is an accommodation and treatment track, which is often less expensive and less disruptive to your company. Your company's overall goal should be early intervention and treatment of employees with drug or alcohol addiction.

6. Inform Employees How They Can Help Addicted Coworkers.

Most employees care about their coworkers or their family members who may be showing signs of struggling with addiction, but have no idea how to help. Explain in your policy manual how employees can safely intervene if they believe a coworker has a problem with addiction. What are their options? Describe some typical scenarios and possible steps that a concerned coworker could safely take. Many employees admit that they cover up for addicted managers to hide their problems.

7. Make Confidentiality And Respect The Core Of Your Company's Approach To Addiction In The Workplace.

National surveys show that addicted employees will avoid treatment, even treatment that's covered by their health insurance, if they are worried about confidentiality and the perceived consequences of coming forward to deal with their disease. The expectation of confidentiality is vital if your employees are to step forward and seek help. Create a process that will encourage employees to step forward to seek help. Train supervisors to establish and maintain a workplace culture that ensures a respectful and confidential environment, in line with the process that has been created.

8. Evaluate Your Company's Efforts To Deal With Addiction.

Are employees accessing your Employee Assistance Program resources for addiction? (Nationally, barely 5-10 percent of eligible employees actually access EAP programs that are available to them.) Evaluate how often your company's services are utilized. If not, do employees not understand the policies? Why aren't they taking advantage of the treatment options? Remember that if they do, they can return to the workplace as sober and productive employees.

9. Make It Easy For Employees To Access Support For Their Sobriety.

Identify aftercare programs that provide counseling and support for the years following treatment. Let supervisors know what resources they can tap into for their employees, including local Alcoholics Anonymous chapters. Provide comfortable alternatives to alcohol at company functions, and avoid scheduling office-related business meetings in bars.

10. Hire Candidates Who Have Sought Treatment For Addiction And Are In Recovery.

People in recovery are highly motivated to succeed and prove themselves, and take tremendous pride in their achievements at work. Hiring employees who have made the transition from addiction to recovery sends a clear message to other employees that your company understands that recovery is possible. Employees in recovery are living proof of that every day.

11. Request Inclusive Health Insurance Coverage For Addicted Employees.

Want to become an "Employer of the Year," where top-quality candidates seek you out as a "Best Place To Work"? Use your company's policy toward addiction treatment as a recruitment and retention tool. Go public about how your company goes the extra mile for employees and their families who are struggling with addiction. Show your commitment by negotiating with your health insurance company for coverage of behavioral health services that include adequate treatment for alcohol and drug addiction.

12. Support Legislation That Guarantees Access To Addiction Treatment.

Join together with the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, American Society of Addiction Medicine, Physician Leadership on National Drug Policy, or other groups in supporting the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act of 2007 now under consideration in Congress. This legislation would require all health insurers to treat the illness of drug addiction no differently than they currently treat other chronic diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes.

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