

## After the Storm: Navigating a Return to Work Following Treatment

By Patrick R. Krill

*"By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."*

*--Benjamin Franklin*

Recently I was asked to make an "emergency" visit to a West Coast office of a national law firm where a crisis was unfolding: associates agonizing, partners threatening to leave, office administrators tossing their hands in the air. Negativity and resentment hung in the air, tales of unmet expectations dominated the discourse. If you wanted to teach someone about the nature of office dysfunction through use of a diagram, this group offered a stick figure for every role. And, it was getting worse by the day. As an attorney/clinician who specializes in working with addicted legal professionals, you might suspect that I was there because an important member of the firm was in the grips of an alcoholic meltdown—that the toxicity of untreated addiction was wreaking havoc on all within its swath. That suspicion would be wrong.

Fortunately for everyone involved, there was no active addiction at the root of this grandly blooming debacle. Instead, it was an unwitting lack of preparation for recovery that had left everyone in a lurch—an unintentional oversight that was easy to understand given the extraordinary amount of heavy lifting everyone did to get their partner into treatment in the first place. It had been a long and draining battle to help their colleague get well and their efforts had been entirely laudable. Now, after he successfully completed inpatient treatment for his alcoholism, it was no surprise that everyone just wanted to "move on" and "get back to normal" now that his "problem" was "fixed." If only it was that easy.

In actuality, the issues facing an attorney and a law firm can be just as formidable after someone addresses their chemical dependency as they can be beforehand—al-

beit for different reasons. A post-treatment return to work can represent a significant stressor, both for the returnee and the office that is welcoming them back. More times than not, however, this stress can be avoided or mitigated by preparation and planning. Having a solid, workable, well-informed and practical plan in place before someone returns from treatment can substantially increase the likelihood of a smoother and more successful reintegration.

The plan should address the needs and challenges of both the firm and the returning individual, keeping in mind that mismatched expectations are common but avoidable through clear and open communication of the issues faced by both parties.

For the newly recovering individual returning to work, their issues may include:

- Anxiety and discomfort about facing colleagues now that their chemical dependency is out in the open or, alternatively;
- Anxiety and discomfort about facing colleagues if the reason for their absence was not fully disclosed to all of them.
- Concern about being judged, stigmatized and labeled.
- An unrealistic expectation that they can immediately repair past damage to relationships.
- An unhealthy desire to "hit the ground running" and quickly resume a substantial workload.
- Feeling pressure to prove themselves.
- Concern about social and work functions that involve alcohol.
- Embarrassment about needing to prioritize their recovery over their practice.

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And, for the law firm that may be welcoming that individual back, their issues may include:

- Confusion about how to support the individual.
- Uncertainty about trusting them.
- Lingering emotional wounds or unprocessed resentments from past behavior.
- Reservations about including them in social functions where alcohol may be served.
- Lack of education/understanding of addiction as a medical disease.
- Unrealistic expectations that the individual is cured.
- Concern about how to protect themselves in the event of a relapse.

While these lists are not comprehensive and every firm will face its own unique challenges and obstacles, no return to work scenario poses challenges so insurmountable that they can't be adequately addressed through thoughtful planning and preparation. If you or someone in your firm needs to take a leave of absence to address a substance abuse issue, carefully and deliberately preparing for an eventual return is of paramount importance. As Mr. Franklin so rightfully noted, preparation truly can be the difference between success and failure.

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Patrick R. Krill is the Assistant Director of Hazelden's Legal Professionals Program in Center City, Minnesota. This residential addiction treatment program incorporates integrated clinical disciplines with individualized planning and care – all in a comfortable, healing, and supportive environment.

The program addresses the addiction problems unique to legal professionals: Lawyers suffer from addiction at twice the rate of those in the general population, and from depression at three times the rate of other professionals. And the very qualities that make them successful (problem-solving, intellectualizing and persuasiveness) can be stumbling blocks to recovery. But with the right care and support, addiction can be treated and managed for life. Core treatment programming at Hazelden is Twelve Step-based and gender-specific, and length of

stay varies with the patient as clinically indicated.

Prior to entering the field of addiction treatment, Patrick spent a decade as a California-licensed attorney who practiced primarily in Los Angeles. Mr. Krill holds a B.A. in Political Science from American University, a J.D. from Loyola Law School, an LL.M. in International Law from the American University Washington College of Law and an MA in Addiction Counseling from the Hazelden Graduate School of Addiction Studies. He is a licensed drug and alcohol counselor (LADC) and active member of the California and Los Angeles County Bar Associations.



Mr. Krill lives in Minneapolis and in his free time enjoys writing, volunteering, working out, yoga and golf.