



Supervisor Newsletter

Reasonable Suspicion Testing (cont.)

In this issue of Supervisor Training Newsletters, we continue with a discussion of Reasonable Suspicion Drug Testing.

Documenting Performance Problems

One of the most important roles of a supervisor in any company is to be able to recognize and document the performance problems of his or her employees that might indicate that the employee could be a substance abuser.

In order to do this properly, the supervisor should utilize a checklist of factors concerning behavioral patterns and job performance issues. Using a checklist will help the supervisor to be as objective as possible.

If the checklist form titled *Reasonable Suspicion Checklist, Supervisor Forms* is not available from the employer, a free copy may be obtained from the Council on Alcohol and Drugs by emailing Cwade@Livedrugfree.org.

This form can be used both for substance abuse recognition leading to a reasonable suspicion drug test, and/or in conjunction with a referral to a company Employee Assistance Program (EAP). However, supervisors should check with company management and the company substance abuse policy before using the checklist.

The *Reasonable Suspicion Checklist* lists a variety of behavioral and job performance problems that a supervisor would need to watch for.

It is extremely important, however, to realize that many behavior problems and job performance issues are not caused by substance abuse. For example, if a person is suffering from certain

diseases or mental health issues like depression, or stress caused by financial problems, or even from common ailments like the flu or allergies—job performance will suffer.

But if the unacceptable job performance issues and behavioral problems continue for an extended period of time, and if they become obvious to supervisors and other employees, the *Reasonable Suspicion Checklist* can be useful in documenting these problems so that the employee can be referred to counseling or for a reasonable suspicion drug test. Remember, however, that the checklist should be used *after* a supervisor becomes concerned about an employee's job performance.

What to Look For

When considering employee behavioral patterns, look for changes in the employee's appearance, mood, and actions. If the employee's appearance has suddenly gone from being neat and clean to careless and sloppy, or if the employee's mood has changed from outgoing and friendly to sullen and withdrawn, these could be indicators of an underlying substance abuse problem.

But keep in mind that problems such as mood swings, excitability, and depression can all be caused by problems other than substance abuse. Supervisors must consider the "totality of circumstances" when making decisions concerning employee behavioral issues.

If it is noted that an employee appears to be frequently irritable with coworkers or becomes preoccupied with illness and death, this could be an indication of substance abuse, or it might indicate the onset of certain mental health disorders. While it is true that sensitivity, nervousness, and irritability are often associated with drug use and/or withdrawal from drugs, this is not always the cause.

Another behavioral issue that might indicate a substance abuse problem is when an employee becomes threatening, or physically assaults a coworker or manager.

Some other indicators are: being unduly talkative, having an exaggerated sense of self-importance, rigidly refusing to change plans, or an over-compliance with any routine (which could indicate an employee's inability to deal with the usual changing circumstances in the workplace).

Also included are frequent argumentativeness, outbursts of crying, or even uncontrollable laughter.

In any case, however, remember that supervisors in a drug free workplace are not expected to interpret or diagnose employee behavioral problems. No one expects a supervisor to act as a psychiatrist or psychologist. Managers are only expected to do that which their company pays them to do: supervise the workplace.

But in performing these duties, supervisors are expected to note behavioral problems of employees and to know that many of the behavioral issues listed in this newsletter and on the checklist can be typical of employees with substance abuse problems.

Job Performance Problems

Most supervisors have received training concerning evaluation of job performance in conjunction with management skills training and specific information on personnel policies and disciplinary actions allowed by their company. Subsequently, supervisors are usually familiar with job performance problems such

as absenteeism, tardiness, leaving the worksite without permission, having a poor attitude with coworkers, increased accidents, a reduction in productivity, etc.

However, it is also important that supervisors recognize the *connection* between certain job performance problems and substance abuse.

Absenteeism is a good example of a job performance problem typical of substance abusers. For instance, substance abusers often commit improper time off and sick leave violations. Similarly, they will often have frequent Friday and Monday absences (due to weekend binges). Other absenteeism-related issues involve excessive morning tardiness and return-from-lunch lateness (due to "before work," at-lunch, and on-the-job drug use).

Substance abusers also often use more sick leave than non-drug-abusing coworkers, frequently use unscheduled vacation time, have their spouse call in sick for them, have more frequent unscheduled short-term absences, take longer lunches and coffee breaks, and make frequent unexcused trips to the restroom and water fountain.

These are all absenteeism issues that could raise a supervisor's suspicion that substance abuse may be involved.

Documenting these kinds of job performance problems is crucial in recording the reasons leading up to a reasonable suspicion drug test, and/or a supervisor referral to counseling.

We will continue this training on Reasonable Suspicion Drug Testing in the next issue of *Supervisor Training Newsletters*.

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