



Supervisor Newsletter

Whenever a new employee is hired, supervisors always hope the employee will perform the job as expected and obey company policies. While most employees do meet or exceed their supervisors' expectations, others fail to follow company rules and regulations.

Unfortunately, some employees exhibit behaviors due to substance abuse that are unacceptable and harmful to the workplace. Supervisors must recognize that a reasonable suspicion drug test, and following up with the appropriate action within company policy, is the proper response when an employee is suspected of drug use or alcohol abuse at work. Yet many supervisors fail to take action when it is warranted due to a number of reasons. This *Supervisor Training Newsletter* will take a look at why supervisors sometimes hesitate to require reasonable suspicion drug tests.

The Reasonable Suspicion Drug Test

Reasonable suspicion drug testing is one of the most important and valuable tools available to a supervisor within a drug free workplace, yet many supervisors never take advantage of it. Why? One of the reasons is that supervisors may not believe in drug testing, or they don't see the benefit. But supervisors in a state certified drug free workplace must realize that it is their duty and responsibility to help prevent drug abuse in the workplace, and to personally support the company's drug free workplace program.

Recognizing the symptoms of a drug abusing employee, knowing how to approach the employee in a non-confrontational

manner, and understanding when it is appropriate to order reasonable suspicion drug testing is a critical part of a successful drug free workplace program.

It is an important part of a supervisor's job to be able to make reasonable suspicion determinations for all employees he or she supervises. The primary focus on making a reasonable suspicion determination, of course, is safety—both for the employee, their coworkers, and the public. It is not the supervisor's job to diagnose an individual's problem, but it is important to intervene early when a decline in job productivity is observed. The problem should never be allowed to continue to a point reaching a crisis situation.

Previous *Supervisor Training Newsletters* have addressed the topic of reasonable suspicion drug testing in great detail, including what constitutes sufficient grounds for testing and the importance of applying the policy fairly and consistently to all employees. Simply stated; reasonable suspicion is defined as facts and circumstances that require further investigation based on documentation. Documentation may include, but is not limited to: physical appearance and behavior of an employee that suggests drug use or possession of drugs, unacceptable work performance, or any other indication that the employee has violated the company's substance abuse policy.

How to Deal With the Issue

Too often supervisors will not confront a suspected drug abusing employee

because they do not know how to proceed, or are uncomfortable doing so. In some cases the supervisor may be so uncomfortable that he or she will continue to ignore the situation and look the other way. In order to overcome this problem, supervisors should familiarize themselves with, and practice techniques on, approaching an employee who may be a candidate for a reasonable suspicion drug and/or alcohol test. The most appropriate approach is one that minimizes the potential for conflict while still being respectful of the employee's right to privacy and confidentiality. Problems occur when supervisors either ineptly or aggressively impose drug testing in a manner that could violate employees' personal or constitutional rights.

The reasonable and prudent approach calls for a cognitive decision that requires the supervisor to assess the facts, signs, and circumstances for which the reasonable suspicion is being determined—and then to cognitively deduce that a similarly trained and experienced supervisor (having observed the same facts, signs, and circumstances) would have reached the same conclusion.

Confrontation/Intervention

Constructive confrontation and intervention is a proven effective strategy for dealing with employees who have a performance problem that may be associated with substance abuse. Constructive confrontation does not involve letting everyone know the situation, approaching the em-

ployee with hostility, or firing the employee without due process.

When confronting a suspected drug abusing employee it is important that the supervisor remain confident, diplomatic, polite, and respectfully mindful of the dignity and confidentiality of the employee. The employee should be given an opportunity to describe and explain the events from his or her perspective. The supervisor should expect and be prepared for denial, but should never act in an accusatory, judgmental, or condescending manner.

Enabling

In an attempt to deal with an employee's substance abuse problem, a supervisor may actually end up enabling the employee. "Enabling" is any action taken that protects the employee from the consequences of his/her actions and actually helps the employee to *not* deal with the problem. It is important that a supervisor not let an employee evade the subject by using excuses or sympathy-evoking tactics. Be straightforward and serious about the problem. Convey that you care and are worried, and encourage the employee to follow up with the referral to the company EAP or resource list to get help to improve his or her performance.

Remember, a supervisor's non-threatening, supportive confrontation will often encourage a troubled employee to seek help—and may be the catalyst in breaking through an employee's denial and beginning the recovery process.