

HOW DOES A MANAGER DEAL WITH AN EMPLOYEE'S EXCESSIVE ALCOHOL/DRUG USE?

Sooner or later, excessive alcohol or drug use by an employee has consequences for the work situation. This applies both to use during and outside the work context. After all, excessive and regular use of alcohol and/or drugs can lead to absenteeism due to illness, reduced productivity, lower quality of work, a greater chance of work accidents, conflicts with colleagues and managers and can create a tense atmosphere in the workplace. Customers can also get a negative image of the company if they are confronted with the consequences of these issues.



The consequences are therefore not only higher costs due to reduced performance or greater safety risks, but also the working atmosphere, image overload and stress.

From CLA 100, the focus is on the **preventive part** and - if there are problems - on the (dis)functioning of the employee. The focus is therefore not on the problematic use of alcohol and drugs themselves, since this is a subjective matter and depends on the drug, the person who uses it and the environment in which it is used. The focus is on the consequences within the work situation. This ensures a correct and objective approach, where the employee is addressed on his - visible and/or measurable - working behaviour.

In the first instance, therefore, it is important for the manager to be alert to **signals**. Signs are usually not alcohol- or drug-specific. Except in the case of manifest use (e.g. drunkenness), one usually does not immediately see that someone has a problem with alcohol or drugs. Certain signs can also indicate other physical or psychosocial problems, such as family difficulties, stress or illness.

THE FOLLOWING SIGNALS MAY BE DETECTED:

- External signs (e.g. alcohol smell, bloodshot eyes, troubled look, weight loss, shaking body, excessive sweating, less groomed appearance, exhaustion, fatigue, visibly under the influence, ...).
- Work-related signals (higher absenteeism, frequent absence from work, loss of concentration, accidents, irregular work pattern, reduced efficiency, poor relations with colleagues, ...).
- Signs outside of work (recent convictions, problems at home, financial problems, psychological and physical complaints, ...).

As a manager, it is important to **intervene** when signals are noticed, whatever the possible cause. If one waits until the worker can be "caught" (e.g. empty bottles, clearly under the influence) the problem is often already far advanced. A quick approach helps to prevent worse.

The manager can **talk** to the employee, discuss the performance problems with him/her and (preferably) record them in writing. The supervisor does not address the employee on the (presumed) use of alcohol and/or drugs, but confronts the employee with objective facts and mainly with the consequences in the work situation. Clear agreements are made (e.g. performance improvement or sanction, consequences of not complying, further agreements, ...) in accordance with the labour regulations and the personnel policy.

During this interview, the employee can be further informed about the possibilities of assistance and be motivated to contact POBOS, if the employer offers this service. The manager can also call on the company's own emergency response team to help monitor the situation.

After a period determined in advance and by mutual agreement, an evaluation moment will follow to discuss the improvement in the functioning and/or further steps or sanctions to be taken.

SOME TIPS THAT YOU AS A MANAGER CAN APPLY DURING SUCH A CONVERSATION:

- Ask about and show understanding for the underlying causes of reduced work performance, such as family problems or stress. Such causes will not always be explicitly discussed.
- Be clear in the communication, try to be concrete (e.g. "you only arrived at work at 10:42 on Monday" instead of "you are always late").
- Do not take on the role of a therapist. The employee will be less inclined to address his performance problems, let alone his alcohol or other drug use. Refer to the employee's own workplace counsellor (occupational physician, psychosocial aspects prevention advisor, social worker, etc.) or to POBOS.
- If the employee agrees, keep him or her informed of your employee's further steps (e.g. His or her choice of a certain type of counselling) through the company counsellor concerned.

Excessive alcohol / drug use

If the employee is unable to be addressed or to continue working, the manager (possibly in consultation with a representative of the social partners) can establish the incapacity to work and the employee can be sent home. In this way, the safety of the employee and that of his colleagues is guaranteed. It is important to pay sufficient attention to how the employee gets home safely.

At a later stage, a discussion can follow with the manager about the incident and the (dis)functioning of the employee.

The in-house emergency worker (occupational physician, prevention advisor on psychosocial aspects, social worker, etc.) forms a bridge between the organisation and the hierarchical line on the one hand, and external assistance (general practitioner, specialised assistance via a psychologist or social worker from POBOS, a centre for alcohol and drug problems, an admission centre, etc.) on the other.

The company emergency services are bound by confidentiality and, on the basis of their position, can take on a specific role in dealing with alcohol and/or drug problems. They do not provide therapy themselves, but with the necessary confidentiality they can signal problems, try to motivate employees, advise and refer. They can contact the family doctor and/or external aid organisations and make arrangements about a possible treatment and/or reintegration (only with the consent of the employee).

Within the framework of shared professional secrecy and with the explicit consent of the employee concerned, they can inform the manager to a limited extent about the assistance process. Of course, they will not communicate about the content of the counselling (unless the employee agrees). Furthermore, they can advise the organisation about necessary changes in the job or working conditions of the employees. They can help with the reintegration of the employee into the organisation.

In the absence of an in-house social worker, the POBOS social worker can partially assume his/her role, within the strict framework of the GDPR.

An alcohol and drug policy promoted by the company and based, among other things, on training and information, specific rules on consumption, procedures in the event of abuse/problematic behaviour and access to/referral to appropriate help, benefits both the employees and the employer.

Useful links:

<https://www.vad.be/nodes/englishfrançais/nl>