

How to Handle an Employee's Impaired Capability to Perform

One of the toughest people-related safety problems the first-line supervisor is faced with is that of the employee with a mental or physical deficiency. Some of these deficiencies could be the result of partially incapacitating injuries, illness, extreme fatigue, drug and alcohol abuse and emotional disturbances. Such conditions can affect strength, stamina, dexterity, coordination, concentration, judgement, memory, mental alertness, reasoning and so on. Substantial evidence has indicated that an alarmingly high percentage of accidents are caused primarily by impaired physical or mental conditions.

The first step in taking care of this problem is to detect and identify the problem. The only way this can be done is to be conscious of each individual worker.

Generally, the first-line supervisor gets to know his people well enough to detect any abnormality in their behavior. There are some specific symptoms that could alert the supervisor to a problem. The supervisor should be aware of unreported injuries that may have been suffered on or off the job. Telltale signs could be limping and other movements that suggest an injury is being favored, homemade bandages and complaints about injuries sustained on or off the job.

An employee who is inattentive or physically spent, or one who shows signs of sleepiness, irritability or poorly coordinated movements could be displaying signs of fatigue or a hangover. Being hungover could be almost as bad, in some jobs, as being intoxicated.

Dizzy spells, vomiting, unsteadiness and an uncharacteristically pale or flushed complexion could well be signs of an illness that may render an employee unable to work safely.

Excitable talking and gesticulation, startled reactions to sound, trembling and talking to one's self could be signs of emotional agitation.

Surely, however, the symptoms of any type of physical or mental deficiency could not be exactly described in an article, so the best indicator is behavior abnormal to the employee's general personality.

Just as symptoms cannot be described in a hard and fast rule, the details of how to handle any given case cannot be described either. Such details depend upon the nature of the disability or impairment, your knowledge of the person, the nature of the work situation and established organizational practices.

However, some general steps for dealing with such cases can be recommended. First, check with the employee to verify the initial impression. The general tone of such a check should be one of sympathetic inquiry. Second, unless your check with the employee completely eliminates your initial impression of a problem, discuss the case with your immediate supervisor to decide how to handle it.

When solving these problems, remember these general do's and don'ts:

In the case of suspected intoxication, do not take a chance on an alcoholic condition. Handle the employee with tact. Don't accuse the employee of being drunk. Your objective

should be to get the employee out of the work environment with the least amount of disturbance.

In the case of emotional disturbance, do not try to play the role of psychiatrist, psychologist or family counselor. Avoid advising the employee on how to handle the problem. Do listen if the employee wants to talk about the problem. Many emotionally disturbed persons calm down once they have talked about their problems to a willing listener. Limit your advice to persuading such persons to consult their physician. The latter knows where to take it from there.

In the case of acute illness, don't take a chance on the following symptoms: abdominal and chest pains, unaccountable vomiting, violent trembling, disabling weakness, acute head pains, extreme nervous agitation, visual disturbances, unconscious states, breathing difficulty, loss of muscular control, repetitive attacks of dizziness or signs of internal bleeding. Such symptoms call for professional medical attention.

By handling these sorts of cases effectively and tactfully, you can, in addition to preventing potential accidents, develop a sincere feeling of respect and willingness to cooperate among your employees.

—Bill England

Divots, Miami Valley Golf Course Supts. Assn.

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