

## CHAPTER 5

### ALCOHOLISM AND THE WORLD OF WORK

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Problem drinking, alcohol abuse, and alcoholism among employed people have existed for centuries, but the problem has been ignored, covered up, or viewed as a moral issue. It is my intent to present a brief overview of alcoholism programming for employed people so that you may gain an understanding of the need for early intervention in this destructive illness and how the work setting may affect this intervention process.

Alcoholism is a progressive disease, often developing over many years before the obvious symptoms are recognized by those around the alcoholic person. The stereotyped alcoholic, or "skid row bum," represents only 3 to 5 percent of those people in our society having alcohol-related problems. This stereotype has allowed us to become comfortable, keeping a safe distance between ourselves and those "others." After all, *we* have homes, families, and respectable jobs; alcoholics do not. This is a myth. Up to 10 percent of you in this audience have problems that result from your use of the drug alcohol. Why don't we intervene when we see a co-worker or friend developing a destructive drinking pattern? Surely we would say something if the problem were high blood pressure or cancer. But the stigma of alcoholism is changing, as the public is becoming aware of the extent of the problem and realizing that many of us are potential victims of this illness.

The Second Special Report to the U.S. Congress on Alcohol and Health states: "The special value in identifying problem drinking among employed persons is that work settings provide unparalleled potential for early and effective intervention. The employed problem drinker can be helped before his problem progresses to a point of deterioration where he becomes unable to do productive work and may need extensive inpatient care."<sup>1</sup> A

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<sup>1</sup> June 1974, p. 169.

well-established fact is that from 5 to 10 percent of a given work population are in trouble with alcohol.

Except for the self-employed, most people who work have a supervisor, one of whose duties is to observe the employee's work performance and to be responsible for it to a higher authority. This higher authority has a legitimate interest in the performance of the work force, particularly when that performance appears to be impaired. The fact that supervision does not always perform this duty effectively and management procedures to oversee this duty are seldom in evidence impacts upon the potential for success of this type of program and leads to many other problems in the workplace.

In order to perform its functions effectively, supervision should be able to identify impaired job performance of workers. Similarly, management should have established procedures for dealing with employees whose job performance becomes impaired. In the case of a program that covers all employees and will be used to identify those with alcohol-related and other problems, it is important to obtain input from labor in the development of the specific procedure.

An appropriate procedure could require a supervisor, upon noting a continuing or recurring impaired work performance that is apparently not job-related, to document the impairment after discussing it with the employee and, if appropriate, his shop steward. Should the impairment continue, the supervisor should follow established procedures whereby the employee will be referred to some type of employee-assistance program. Here a trained person will work with the employee to determine the cause of the impaired performance.

When alcohol-related problems are involved, a course of treatment suitable to the situation will be worked out, including medical treatment if needed. In those cases where the impaired performance is not alcohol-related, it may be rooted in marital or family problems, debt, or legal difficulties, to mention a few of the possibilities. In any such case, the employee-assistance program will work with the employee to seek out suitable community-based, care-giving resources to deal with his problem. When an employee fails to utilize the available resources, his continued impaired performance will lead to the usual administrative disciplinary procedures.

The relatively few companies that established management control systems to deal with alcoholism during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s set out to identify the alcoholic population among their employees. To accomplish this, they trained supervisors to diagnose alcoholism by observing such symptoms as bloodshot eyes, tremors, staggering gait, or boozy breath. A phenomenon labeled "supervisory wobble" emerged, in which the supervisor alternated between approval and disapproval of what was obviously deviant behavior. This phenomenon has been well documented by Drs. Trice and Roman in their book, *Spirits and Demons at Work*.<sup>2</sup> Frequently, years went by while a supervisor ignored or covered up a situation, to the detriment of the employee's health and chances for recovery—as well as to the detriment of the employer's balance sheet. While some employees in trouble with alcohol were identified and treated, often it was a case of "too little, too late."

As research efforts were applied to the problems encountered in the implementation of these early programs, a greater understanding of the identification procedures developed. Job impairment, as demonstrated by such factors as repeated illness, unauthorized absenteeism, decreased productivity, on-the-job injuries, and personal distress, became the criterion, and supervisors were trained in better techniques for observing job performance on the basis of these factors. However, such programs continued to be labeled "alcoholism," and all employees were sent to the alcoholism counselor.

Nevertheless, success rates improved, and more than two out of three of those motivated to undergo treatment returned to their jobs rehabilitated. The problem was less one of the treatment's success than of identification technique, and community stigma still acted to prevent meaningful penetration into the employee population at risk.

When the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism was established in 1971, its Occupational Programs Branch made a survey of existing programs to determine what common threads of policy and procedure produced the early identification of employees whose job performance was being affected by their use of

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<sup>2</sup> Harrison M. Trice and Paul M. Roman, *Spirits and Demons at Work* (Ithaca, N.Y.: New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, 1972).

alcohol. It was noted from this survey that research and experimentation by several companies and concerned individuals were resulting in innovative changes. As compared with the limited success of earlier programs, these changes promised much greater effectiveness in reaching more employees in trouble with alcohol and in reaching them at an earlier point in their illness.

By looking for the "troubled employee," we are able to identify more employees who are in trouble with alcohol and to identify them at an earlier stage than by any other method now known. Three advantages of this method are as follows: (1) By doing away with the stigma that still attaches to an "alcoholism program," you identify more people with problems in their use of alcohol. (2) Supervisors who are troubled about having to "diagnose" alcoholics are comfortable with the more traditional duty of evaluating job performance. (3) Labor and management feel more at ease in that they are not involved in what to date has been viewed as a "do-gooder" activity or a notorious "witch hunt" to round up all the drunks.

The earlier identification on the basis of job performance means that the medical complications allowing the diagnosis of alcoholism through physical manifestations and laboratory findings are seldom evident in the troubled employee. The key element in an employee-assistance program is the fact that it is not oriented toward treatment in the work setting. The staff consists of what might be called "motivational interviewers," whose primary function is to link the troubled employee with the community-based resource most suitable to his needs. The task of labor and management is that of identifying deteriorating job performance; the community care-givers provide the appropriate diagnostic and treatment services.

In fact, it is not imperative that an employee-assistance program be an in-house function. Small employers have found it more economical to contract for this service with an individual or organization that serves a number of other employers in consortium style. This separate service may insure the confidentiality of those seeking treatment and thereby encourage self-referrals.

The availability of treatment services appropriate and acceptable to employed people is of concern to any company considering the development of an employee-assistance program. The re-

sources should include not only those services for alcohol and alcohol-related problems but also those for credit counseling, legal aid, drug problems, marital and family problems, and other difficulties that are encountered by employees and their families. Often these resources must be created or upgraded to make them acceptable to employed people. At the same time, a company must look at its health insurance coverage to ensure that coverage for both in- and out-patient services for alcoholism is included.

In summary, we find that there is a major effort under way to develop programs in employment settings that provide for early identification of employees whose job performance is affected by the use of alcohol. A survey by NIAAA in the spring of 1974 indicated that there were 621 programs in various stages of development covering employees in the public and private sectors. Some have been initiated by management, some by labor, and some jointly. The goal remains the same—to retain valuable employees on the job.

I invite you to join with us in this effort.

## THE PROBLEMS OF ALCOHOLISM IN INDUSTRY

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Alcoholism among employed people is increasingly costly to both employers and employees—creating an annual drain estimated at \$25 billion. Through the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the Federal Government is working with management and organized labor in business, industry, and governmental agencies to identify, on the basis of impaired job performance, those employees in trouble with alcohol. While some of those with impaired performance will be found to be suffering from problems other than alcohol abuse, many such individuals can also be helped. Using the job-performance criterion results in much earlier identification of the alcohol abuser than the method used in the past, which was based on identification by the visible manifestations of alcoholism, and thereby permits generally less costly treatment and a greater recovery rate. Further, motivation to accept meaningful treatment to remedy job impairment is very

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