

Guide for Difficult Conversations: Talking to Employees About Substance Use Concerns

Supporting employees who may be struggling with alcohol or drug use requires compassion, clarity, and professionalism. HR managers and supervisors play an important role in fostering a safe, supportive workplace.

Before the Conversation

- Review and document workplace observations (facts only, not assumptions).
- Prepare specific examples of performance or behavior concerns.
- Ensure privacy — choose a confidential, non-threatening location.
- Be familiar with company policy, FMLA, and available resources (EAP, HR support, treatment options).

During the Conversation

Sample Opening Script

“I wanted to check in because I’ve noticed some changes in your work, and I care about your wellbeing. I’d like to talk with you about what’s going on and how we can support you.”

Talking Points for HR/Managers

- Focus on observable behaviors, not speculation. “Over the past two weeks, you’ve been late three times and missed a project deadline. Can you help me understand what’s going on?”
- Show empathy without excusing behavior. “I understand that life can feel overwhelming. We want to support you while also ensuring the work gets done.”
- Reinforce confidentiality and support. “This conversation is private. We want to make sure you know about the resources available to help.”

If the Employee Becomes Defensive

- Stay calm and avoid confrontation.
- Redirect to documented behaviors. “I hear your concerns, but my role is to address performance and attendance. Here are the facts I’ve documented.”
- Reassure support options. “This is not about punishment. It’s about making sure you have the support you need.”

Closing the Conversation

- Summarize the concerns discussed.

- Outline next steps (EAP referral, HR support, leave policies).
- Provide written resources (EAP contact, HR toolkit, treatment referral guide).
- Encourage follow-up. “Let’s check back in next week to see how things are going.”

Key Reminders for HR

- Document everything factually.
- Avoid labeling, diagnosing, or making assumptions.
- Always connect the conversation back to workplace performance and safety.
- Provide resources and encourage professional help.

Downloadable Resource: Conversation Scripts for HR & Managers (quick-reference guide with sample phrasing and do/don’t checklist).