

Do's and Don'ts: Discussing Addiction in the Workplace

HR managers and supervisors must approach conversations about substance use carefully to support employees while maintaining legal compliance and workplace safety.

Do's

- Focus on observable behaviors and performance, not assumptions about causes.
- Maintain privacy and confidentiality during all conversations.
- Be empathetic and supportive while keeping professional boundaries.
- Provide resources such as EAP, treatment referral guides, or HR toolkits.
- Document discussions factually (dates, behaviors, impact on work).
- Follow company policies and legal requirements (FMLA, ADA, short-term disability).

Don'ts

- Label, diagnose, or assume that the employee has a substance use disorder.
- Make threats or use punitive language in the initial conversation.
- Gossip or share private information with coworkers.
- Ignore performance issues — address the work impact separately.
- Pressure the employee to disclose details of their treatment or personal life.

Next Steps

- Encourage employees to seek professional evaluation if there are concerns.
- Offer referral pathways and share available resources.
- Follow up on workplace performance while providing ongoing support.

Downloadable Resource: Do's and Don'ts of Discussing Addiction in the Workplace (Quick-Reference PDF).