A Practical Guide for Managers and HR Professionals

Everyday ways to support employees while maintaining clear workplace expectations

Support and accountability can work together

Employees in recovery should be treated with dignity and evaluated by the same fair, job-related standards as other employees. Support does not mean overlooking performance or safety concerns; it means responding consistently and connecting people with appropriate resources.

What managers can do

Set clear expectations for job duties, attendance, conduct, and safety.

Give timely, specific feedback based on observable work behaviors.

Address performance concerns early, privately, and respectfully.

Apply policies consistently rather than making assumptions based on a person's history.

Know the organization's process for leave, accommodations, EAP referrals, and safety concerns.

Keep personal or health information confidential and share it only with those who have a legitimate need to know.

How to respond when an employee asks for support

Listen without judgment and thank the employee for raising the concern.

Ask what workplace issue or support need they would like to discuss; do not press for personal details.

Explain available resources and the appropriate HR process.

Be clear about what you can keep confidential and any limits that apply under policy or law.

Document work-related facts and agreed next steps, not speculation or personal opinions.

Helpful language

Try: “Thank you for talking with me. Let's review what support or workplace process may be available.”

Try: “You do not need to share personal details with me. I can connect you with HR to discuss the appropriate options.”

Try: “I want to be clear about the expectations of the role and make sure you understand the resources available.”

Avoid: “I know what you're going through.”

Avoid: “You need to tell me exactly what happened in treatment.”

Avoid: “I can guarantee nobody will ever find out.”

Connecting employees to resources

Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if available.

Human Resources or the designated leave and accommodation contact.

Health plan behavioral health or substance use treatment benefits.

Community-based recovery support and peer services.

Qualified healthcare or treatment providers selected by the employee.

Responding to performance or safety concerns

Focus on observable behavior, job requirements, and immediate safety—not assumptions about substance use.

Follow established procedures for impairment concerns, emergencies, incident documentation, and reasonable suspicion testing where applicable.

If there is an immediate safety risk, follow emergency and workplace safety protocols.

Do not attempt to diagnose an employee or conduct an informal investigation into their health.

A practical takeaway

Managers are not expected to provide treatment. Their role is to communicate respectfully, maintain fair expectations, protect privacy, and connect employees with the right workplace resources.

This resource is for general educational purposes and is not legal, clinical, or employment advice. Employers should consult qualified HR, legal, and healthcare professionals about individual situations and applicable federal, state, and local requirements.