Recognizing Concerns, Starting a Conversation, and Connecting to Support

A practical guide for employers and managers

Recognize workplace concerns without diagnosing

Changes in attendance, performance, conduct, or safety may signal that an employee needs support. These changes can have many causes, including health, family, workload, or workplace factors. They are not proof of substance use.

Focus on specific, observable facts: missed deadlines, repeated absences, documented policy violations, or a safety incident. Avoid labels, rumors, and assumptions.

Prepare before the conversation

Review objective documentation and the relevant workplace policy.

Choose a private setting and an appropriate time, unless an immediate safety issue requires urgent action.

Know the purpose of the conversation and the outcome needed—for example, clarifying expectations or discussing available resources.

Consider whether HR should participate.

Do not attempt to investigate an employee's medical history or determine whether they have a substance use disorder.

Starting a respectful conversation

Describe the specific work-related concern, using neutral language.

Explain the impact on job responsibilities, safety, or team operations.

Invite the employee to respond and listen without judgment.

Review expectations and next steps.

Offer information about HR, EAP, benefits, or other support resources.

Sample conversation starter

“I'd like to talk about a few work-related concerns. I've noticed [specific, observable examples]. I want to understand whether there is anything affecting your ability to meet these expectations and review the support or workplace resources available. You do not need to share personal medical details with me. Let's talk about next steps.”

If the employee discloses a concern

Thank them for speaking with you and respond calmly.

Do not promise absolute secrecy. Explain that information will be handled discreetly and shared only as appropriate under policy and law.

Connect the employee with HR or the designated support contact.

Discuss the relevant workplace process, such as leave, accommodation, or EAP access, without making promises about eligibility or outcomes.

Document the work-related discussion and agreed next steps objectively.

If there is an immediate safety concern

Follow the organization's established safety and emergency procedures.

Do not allow an employee who may be unsafe to perform safety-sensitive duties while the concern is being addressed under policy.

Contact emergency services when there is an immediate threat to life or serious harm.

Follow applicable procedures for transportation, incident reporting, and any required testing. Consult HR and legal counsel as appropriate.

Connecting to support

Human Resources or the designated employee support contact.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if available.

Health plan behavioral health or substance use treatment benefits.

Qualified healthcare or addiction treatment providers.

Community-based recovery support and peer services.

Follow up appropriately

Confirm the employee understands the workplace expectations and the available support pathway.

Set a reasonable follow-up date when appropriate.

Continue to address performance and safety using objective facts and consistent policies.

Protect the employee's privacy and avoid sharing details with coworkers.

A practical takeaway

Managers do not need to diagnose or solve a personal health concern. They can recognize work-related changes, have a respectful conversation, maintain clear expectations, and connect employees with appropriate support.

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.