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HELP

Talking to Your Boss About Your Alcohol Abuse

By Emily Meehan

Should an employee ever divulge a drinking problem to a manager voluntarily?

Part of Liz Dvorak's job as a human-resources specialist for the Army Corps of Engineers in St. Paul, Minn., is promoting the employee-assistance programs available to staff members if they have drug or alcohol problems. She puts up refrigerator magnets in the office kitchen advertising the anonymous and confidential EAP services. Ms. Dvorak, 51, long hesitated to get some employee assistance for herself.

Ms. Dvorak says she had a drinking problem for years. She rarely let it interfere with her work, which helped her minimize the problem. "There were times I missed work because of hangovers, but not very often, and it was a denial kind of thing," she says. "If I missed a lot of work, it would be obvious to me that I had a problem, and I didn't want to do that."

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About three years ago, she says she used the employee-assistance package to enter an alcohol-abuse treatment program. Counseling was three nights a week, after work, and billed to the Army as an expense without a listing of the client or the type of treatment. Ms. Dvorak says she could have kept the information to herself, and no one at work would have known.

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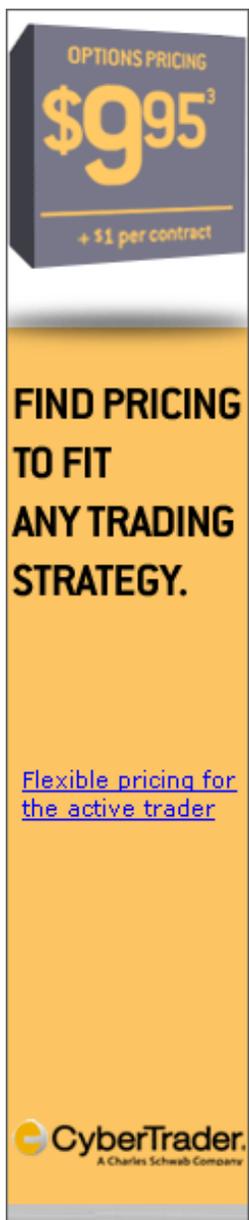
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But she was tired of keeping secrets, she says. The first person she told at work was her boss.



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Revealing an alcohol problem to a supervisor can be a flat-out risky proposition, especially if it has affected your performance. Doctors and HR professionals, including Ms. Dvorak, caution employees to think carefully before assuming that a supervisor will accept the news with sympathy and the same relief that the alcoholic may feel at finally coming to a point of resolution.

Ms. Dvorak says she felt confident that her sterling record at work and the good relationship she had with her boss would make for a smooth conversation, even a cathartic one. "It was a decision for my personal benefit to not carry a burden of shame and embarrassment," she says. "I don't want to hide who I am, because I think that keeps people sick."

Late in the afternoon, she says she went into her supervisor's office and asked to speak with her. They closed the door. Ms. Dvorak was worried she would cry. "I just want you to know what's going on," she says she told her boss. "I can't talk about it a whole lot, but I've been going through this treatment." Her boss was calm and supportive. They didn't talk much more about it at the time.

While many alcoholics let their dependency flood every facet of their lives, those that limit their drinking to after hours may have a tougher time recognizing its effects. But the employee who sips from a flask stowed in her desk drawer is likely to be impaired at work, perform poorly, and warrant discipline from above that could include termination.

Charles Herndon, director of Providence Breakthrough, a substance-abuse treatment center in Anchorage, Alaska, says he cautions his clients against alerting their supervisors. "I recommend keeping the reasons for chemical dependency treatment private in order to reduce the likelihood of receiving prejudicial treatment based on their diagnosis," he says.

If the individual can be treated after work in an outpatient program, keeping the matter private is not difficult. Federal laws and regulations keep privileged medical information between doctor and patient, and many employee-assistance packages don't share the client names when billing a company for services.

But when a doctor deems a person so ill from alcohol abuse that he or she must enter inpatient treatment for four to six weeks, employers will likely need an explanation to permit the leave. The Family and Medical Leave Act requires that employers with more than 50 employees permit unpaid leave to an employee who has been with the organization for a year or more for up to 12 work weeks per year in the case of a serious health condition that inhibits his or her ability to perform the job, among other situations.

Employers may also have their own policy governing the type of leave granted, says Michael Aitken, director of governmental affairs with the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). It could be paid leave, for example, or considered sick leave or short-term disability, especially if the employee seeking it has been with the employer for less than 12 months, he says.

If you're that employee with a life-threatening case of alcoholism, how do you explain your situation to the boss, who certainly will notice a six-week absence? Keeping the nature of the problem private might take the poker face of a CIA agent. Those with a more transparent veneer may choose to consult their human-resources department before disclosing their condition to the boss.

That's the course of action Johnny Taylor, chairman of SHRM, recommends. "The HR person is trying to step outside of their own biases and do the best thing for the employee and the employer, whereas managers may not be in that same position," says Mr. Taylor, who is senior vice president of human resources for IAC/InterActiveCorp. "Imagine you go to someone who's extremely conservative and judgmental?" He says HR should work with an employee to come up with a plan for how to bring up the problem with his or her manager.

If an employee has been working while impaired by alcohol, an employer has grounds for dismissal, says Loring Spolter, an employment law attorney in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

A long period of sloppy work as a result of being hungover or drunk can jeopardize a career. Dr. Herndon says when job performance declines, and an employer notices, many companies may prefer to try to solve the problem rather than replace the employee. "If the employer knows that there is a treatable cause for the impairment, they are more likely to refer for treatment and allow the individual to come back on probation after completing treatment," he says.

-- Ms. Meehan is a reporter at WSJ.com.

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