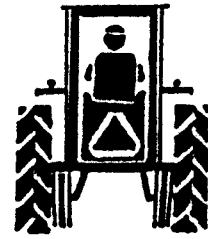




PEOPLE in AG



MANAGING FARM PERSONNEL

MERCED, SAN JOAQUIN AND STANISLAUS COUNTIES

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A DANGEROUS MIX--ALCOHOL, DRUGS AND WORK ON THE FARM

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Jerry had run the loader a thousand times before and he was always careful. He'd positioned all the shields and the equipment was working well. As foreman on Bob's ranch, feeding the cattle was one of his easier jobs. But last week Jerry had his arm caught in the auger and was seriously hurt.

Bob feels bad and he is worried. Deep down he will always wonder if he could have done more to prevent the accident.

You see, Jerry has a drinking problem and Bob knew about it.

He had noticed some telltale signs--fatigue, irritability, and impaired concentration. And he found a hidden bottle under the granary last fall and another behind the fertilizer bags this spring.

But Bob didn't say anything. He let it slide. His reasons made sense at the time: Jerry had been with him for three years and he was dependable. He was a hard worker, he got along well with the other workers and with Bob's family. Besides, Jerry had a family to support and he seemed to be coping with his problem.

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Now Bob wonders: was it one of those accidents that just happen, or did drinking play a part in it?

Improving safety in the workplace is a concern to every manager, yet accidents still happen. A 1988 Canadian survey reported a total of 5.1 million accidents, half of which were caused by carelessness or unsafe activity.

People who used alcohol or drugs had an accident rate 1.6 times higher than non-users.

Alcohol and drug abuse isn't a simple problem, but it is one that employers have to come to terms with. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, some six million workers use alcohol and drugs regularly on the job in Canada and the U.S. And this abuse is estimated to cost nearly \$100 billion in lost productivity each year.

What Can Employers Do?

"Employers are in a good position to help an individual with a drinking problem," says Rusty, a rehabilitation centre counsellor and a recovering alcoholic who has been dry for fifteen years. "I knew drinking was destroying my life, slowly killing me, but I wasn't doing anything about it. It wasn't until my employer addressed the issue that I did something--I got help. Now I'm thankful."

Rusty appreciated his employer's candour and concern--especially his concern about safety. One of Rusty's fellow workers wasn't so lucky. "He was never confronted about his

drinking problem," says Rusty. "He got caught in the power take-off of the machine he was running and died."

So how does an employer address the issue?

If you suspect an employee is impaired, first verify that alcohol or drugs are the cause of their behaviour and not something else such as sickness or stress. Second, take steps to remove them from the work place, ensuring that they do not cause harm to themselves or to others by operating equipment or vehicles. Make a record of the event, and have a witness if possible. Above all, use judgement and discretion. It is often best to have the employee take the day off without pay, and take disciplinary or other appropriate action at a later time.

"Don't become an enabler," says Rusty. "An 'enabler' is a person who allows the problem to persist either at work or at home by covering up and allowing the individual not to face the issue."

The best approach is one which clearly outlines the consequences: what will happen if the employee chooses to keep drinking. It should clearly leave the responsibility with the employee. Discuss the problem with the employee in a private meeting, and write down the circumstances and your expectations as an employer. Let him or her know that you would like to see their problem resolved. Develop a mutually agreed upon series of steps to be followed, specifying a reasonable time frame within

which the problem can be resolved.

And most important, let the employee know where to find help.

Dave Edge, an addiction counsellor for Substance Abuse Services, notes that there are a number of do's and don'ts that employers should be aware of when they are dealing with employees who have a problem with substance abuse. "There are no easy right answers," he says. "Both the problem and the solutions are as varied as the individuals involved."

Some general guidelines are:

1. Don't threaten unless you are prepared to follow through. To threaten and not follow up only reinforces to the substance abuser that there will not be any consequences for his or her behaviour. This only makes it much more difficult for you, the employer, to deal with future incidents.

2. Focus on the problem behaviour, not on the individual. Don't use violence, either physical or verbal, and avoid nagging or provoking. Try not to confront the individual when you are angry. If you stay focused on the behaviour, it is less likely that you will become embroiled in emotional confrontation.

3. Stick to the subject. One of the ways substance abusers have of avoiding responsibility for their actions is to try to turn attention to other topics. Finish with your agenda before moving to something else.

These suggestions are only a general guide to be followed with both judgement and discretion. If in doubt, seek professional advice.

Dave also points out that substance abuse problems involve the whole family. Even if the person with the problem isn't ready to deal with it, professional advice can benefit other family members. There are also many local hospital, mental health, and church programs that are equipped to help. In your area there may also be self help groups of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Family Support.

Job Performance and Chemical Dependency, by Robert Maddux and Lynda Voorhes, is a resource manual on alcohol and drug abuse written for employers. This is available from Crisp Publications, Los Altos, California. Alcoholics Anonymous's Big Book also has a chapter written specifically for employers.

There is no single right way to handle this problem. To deal effectively with employees who have a substance abuse problem, employers must understand that it takes more than concern and a helping hand. Substance abuse problems are life threatening and have severe consequences, and are better dealt with by professionals. But by knowing what professional help is available in the community, managers can point employees in a direction that can be helpful for all concerned.

And that can only improve farm safety.