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## Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry

### The Alcoholic Employee Problem

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According to The Wall Street Journal, a senior VP won a sizeable lawsuit, invoking the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Known as a good executive, he had behaved badly at a company function and was fired one month later while he was in alcoholism treatment. The case was touted as “a warning to employers who fire or discipline workers for alcohol abuse.”

The “sudden alcoholic” syndrome Clinically, disputes between recovering alcoholics and their employers are usually due to maladaptive attitudes on both sides. Typically, the righteous employer wants the alcoholic fired because of the alcoholic’s past behavior – while the litigious alcoholic wants to hang on to the job by overplaying the “I-have-a-disease” card.

In many such cases, the employer had viewed the drinking alcoholic for years as a talented, hard-working charmer, a good public-relations person or a great socializer. In short, an ideal employee. But when job performance deteriorates seriously or the drinking becomes a public scandal, we have a “sudden alcoholic.” Suddenly it is clear that though the alcoholic had worked hard, it was only in spurts; and when he or she occasionally accepted disagreeable assignments, it was not done out of company loyalty, but to earn brownie points for use as bargaining chips in future alcohol-related screw-ups.

“We’ve been duped” is now the corporate reaction. It is usually common knowledge that when the alcoholic was still a good producer, management had repeatedly winked an eye at the alcoholic’s bizarre behavior. But now the company wants the alcoholic punished for past behavior and fired. Why? Because of the damage this could cause to the company’s name.

The unreasonable alcoholic, on the other hand, not only rejects accountability for past behaviors (“I couldn’t help it, I have a disease”) but wants special consideration for the rest of his/her career because “I get tired easily,” “I can’t handle stress,” “I need extra time for AA meetings.” All this may be seen as the alcoholic overplaying the “I have a disease” card.

Here is a proven solution In the U.S. Navy in the early 1970’s, we handled such problems by enforcing a clearly written policy:

- 1) Alcoholism is a treatable disease.
- 2) It should be diagnosed at the earliest signs.
- 3) After rehab, recovering alcoholics go back to their previous job, if at all possible.
- 4) It is the recovering alcoholic’s responsibility to do whatever is necessary to maintain abstinence and control the disease, much like diabetics or cardiacs have to take care of their disease.
- 5) Recovering alcoholics cannot be fired for past behaviors, but their retention and future promotions will depend on abstinence, satisfactory job performance and acceptable behavior, all of which are monitored (same as the cardiac’s and diabetic’s health is monitored).

The hardest part to enforce was the employer’s attitude, i.e. the deeply entrenched Navy “drinking” mystique. For example, rough-and-tough (alcoholic) pilots were coddled (“they work hard and drink hard”) until they got sick enough to warrant a medical discharge. Under the same unwritten policy, good pilots who were teetotalers or recovering alcoholics were covertly sidelined out of the Navy because they didn’t have “the right stuff.” (The real reason? They didn’t fit in with hard-drinking squadron customs.)

On the employee’s side of the attitude coin, we occasionally found marginally performing recovering alcoholics. Their underlying problem was that they were Passive-dependent Personality types. They had for years been kept in the Navy while others pulled their load in the boat. After treatment, such “recovering” alcoholics – since their performance was now more closely monitored – had to be discharged with an appropriate psychiatric diagnosis such as “Inadequate Personality Disorder” because their performances, which had always been marginal, remained marginal even after they were clean and sober.

Clinically speaking, there are no “sudden” alcoholics in the workplace (or any where else, for that matter). The “functional” alcoholic employee is a sign of opportunistic management or attitudinal problems of hard drinkers at the top. Successful companies today do not condone heavy drinking, even among their top performers. With a clear, written policy, signed and promulgated by the CEO, the company can steer alcoholics and drug addicts into rehab early, then retain those who work and behave responsibly – and discharge those who can’t or won’t.

When both bosses and recovering alcoholics do what they are supposed to do, there are no problems or lawsuits. “The best employee we had when he/she was sober” becomes “the best employee we have – period,” because now they are always sober.

If not, there is, or was, a bad attitude on either, or both sides.

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