

Kenneth L. Carper's Commentary on "Drinking in the Workplace"

Commentary On
Drinking in the Workplace

Substance abuse, or rather the abuse of persons by harmful substances, is a serious problem in the workplace. In construction and in other engineering industries, alcohol and drugs contribute to lost workdays, increased medical costs, inefficient productivity, poor quality work, and safety problems. These effects of substance abuse impact not only the drug user, but also other employees, the employer, clients and, in some cases, the general public.

Mandatory testing for drugs has been implemented in some industries, such as the transportation industry, where impaired judgment can result in significant injuries and deaths to innocent parties. Expansion of mandatory testing into other areas of the workplace has been the subject of many journal articles and several full-length books (Coombs 1991, NASPE 1984, Tulacz 1989). This topic raises important ethical questions. The protection of society and the rights of employers are in conflict with the civil rights of individuals, their freedom and their privacy.

Troubling moral questions have particularly been directed at those mandatory testing programs that are not accompanied by successful rehabilitation efforts. Such programs are not usually founded in concern for the individual. They are more likely based in concern for diminishing productivity. Those programs that simply use testing results to dismiss abusers from employment have feeble moral ground for existence, for they view individuals only as means to an end, rather than as objects having intrinsic value.

Immanuel Kant and many other philosophers have placed emphasis on the intrinsic value of human beings. Moral theory encourages the treatment of people as ends in themselves, never only as means to an end (Rachels 1986). It is precisely this point, the intrinsic value of human individuals, that suggests the proper course of action for John Crane.

John Crane's dilemma is this: Should he talk with Andy Pullman about Andy's drinking problem, or should he overlook it? John is not the kind of person who is comfortable with the prospect of discussing this problem with Andy. In this respect, most people are like John. There are not very many people in this world who find it easy to initiate such a conversation. However, John and Andy have worked together for several years. During that time, John has developed a respect for Andy's work, and it appears that they have a close working relationship. Andy is extremely fortunate to have a friend like John. John may be the best person to talk with Andy, and he should do so.

Friends can have an impact when they show genuine concern. A common public service announcement says, "Friends don't let friends drive drunk." Friends don't stand quietly by and let friends abuse themselves and their future with harmful substances, without expressing their concerns. Certainly, there are important aspects of privacy and freedom to consider, but an honest attempt should be made to communicate.

Often, substance abuse is a symptom of low self-esteem. This may not be the case in Andy's situation, but if it is, it will be encouraging to Andy to find out that John values him enough to discuss the problem with him.

John's concerns are genuine and sincere. His motives are founded in his respect for Andy and his desires for Andy's prosperous future. He is not motivated by self-interest, and Andy will likely understand this. If more persons were willing to lay aside their discomfort, and express genuine concerns for each other, mandatory drug testing might not be an issue. The concerns expressed by friends for each other are founded in the treatment of individuals as objects of intrinsic value.

Harvey Hillman, the Plant Manager, asks John later to comment on the appropriateness of placing Andy in the top quality control position. It seems that John should not raise his concerns in this forum, unless he has been willing to discuss the problem first with Andy. If he hasn't already done so, he should approach Andy immediately following his visit with Harvey.

Of course, John should discuss the problem with Harvey if his visit with Andy is not productive. Andy's promotion may place him in a position such that others are adversely impacted by his impaired judgment. There is a point, beyond which, a concern for the intrinsic value of those other individuals must take precedence.

Very few who have managed people in industry have not had to deal with an alcohol problem and, with the present growth of the drug culture, the chance of needing to deal with drug usage in the workplace grows even greater.

In no way can use of alcohol or drugs in the workplace be condoned or sanctioned. A user cannot be a 100% performer (although many will assure you they are) if he (or she) is using alcohol or drugs in the workplace. A user--as a less than 100% performer--cheats the company in his performance. He (or she) cheats himself/herself, too, by giving a performance that may cost the individual chances for pay raises and promotion.

In a workplace where machinery use is involved, the user runs the risk of injury to himself, and possibly to others, because his reaction time has slowed down. In quality control, or other functions where decisions must be made quickly, and where the decision affects the operations of other departments, it is absolutely critical that the decision-maker not be under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

In the case described here, John, as a friend must speak to Andy about his drinking problem (and it is a problem if he is drinking at the beginning of work and on breaks--in truth, Andy is undoubtedly an alcoholic) and urge him to seek help. Paralleling the slogan of today, "Friends don't let friends drive drunk," John should bring home to Andy that "Friends don't let friends risk their job by working drunk."

Andy must be a good worker if he can use alcohol and still perform at a level that merits him consideration for a promotion. Think how much better he could be if he could free himself from alcohol-dependence!

After John and Andy have talked, if Andy takes no action to curb his problem, John should let company management know of Andy's problem. This action is a form of "whistleblowing." End of a friendship?--perhaps, but this action may keep Andy from a job whose pressure will deepen his need to drink. Not getting the job, if followed by appropriate advice from management, may shock Andy into admitting his problem and doing something about it. Andy will never give up his drinking until he admits he has a drinking problem and seeks a cure.

As to compulsory drug testing--companies are now beginning to make drug testing a part of the pre-employment physical exam. This is done with the full knowledge of the prospective employee who can refuse the exam if he (or she) chooses. However, refusal removes any opportunity for obtaining the job.

Unions will have to be convinced, through appropriate negotiations, that mandatory drug testing and the elimination of drug users from the workplace is necessary for the overall health of the company and subsequent improvement of the lot of the worker in such a company. One suggestion to help to get the union to agree to drug testing is to offer rehabilitation at company expense to drug users revealed by the testing program.

I see no reason to exempt the professional workforce at Branch from drug testing-- this case study has already shown us problems in existence in the professional workforce! Some may see drug testing as an invasion of privacy, but it is truthfully a means of saving a professional worker from destroying himself (herself). As suggested above, the company could enhance drug testing by offering paid leave for rehabilitation of addicted individuals.

The troubles at Branch seem to be so deeply rooted that one must fault top management of the company. Absenteeism, shoddy workmanship, profit decline, drug and alcohol problems are symptoms of management out of touch with what is actually going on in the company. If I were on the Board of Directors of this company, I'd push for major changes in company management and an overhaul of supervisory practices.

Suggested Readings:

1. Coombs, Robert H. and L. J. West 1991. Drug Testing: Issues and Options, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
2. National Association of State Personnel Executives and Council of State Governments 1984. Drug Testing: Protection for Society, or Violation of Civil Rights?, Lexington, KY.
3. Rachels, James 1986. The Elements of Moral Philosophy, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA, pp. 114-117.
4. Tulacz, Gary J. 1989. What You Need to Know About Workplace Drug Testing, Prentice-Hall, Old Tappan, NJ.