

Michael Davis' Commentary on "Drinking in the Workplace"

Commentary On
Drinking in the Workplace

This seems to be a time to blame alcohol and illegal drugs for many of our problems, including crime, inefficiency, and low scores on achievement tests. The empirical evidence is too incomplete to establish even a strong correlation between, say, drug use and inefficiency. And what evidence we do have does not tell us which is cause and which effect. For example, unprofitable companies may have more alcoholism, absenteeism, and accidents than efficient companies. But are they unprofitable because their workers are drunk on the job, absent too much, and prone to accidents? Or are the workers drunk, absent too much, and prone to accidents because the company treats their workers so badly that they just don't care anymore? Some companies have been able to reduce alcoholism, absenteeism and accidents simply by making work more interesting. Profitability has followed. Other companies (like Branch) have adopted drug testing with no noticeable increase in productivity. So, we must be careful not to confuse symptoms of trouble with causes.

Managers are as human as the rest of us. Like the rest of us, they tend to blame others for a problem long before they consider blaming themselves. Every manager wants to be a "can do guy". Few will admit to being stymied. None will say, "I'm the problem. I'm a bad manager. Fire me." Yet, managers certainly can be stymied. And some are bad managers and should be fired--or, at the very least, put in a position of less responsibility.

From this perspective, Branch looks like a badly run company the management of which is looking for someone to blame. Like many American companies these days, they have hit upon those who "abuse" alcohol and certain illegal drugs. Those who "abuse" tobacco, coffee, and chocolate are exempt; as are those who drive wildly or can't pull themselves from the TV set. The result is predictable: a witch hunt more likely to hurt efficiency than help it.

Consider Andy Pullman. His work has always been first rate. By all the usual standards, he should be promoted to head Quality Control. Yet, John Crane now has doubts. He has frequently smelled alcohol on Pullman's breath. Pullman apparently drinks on the job. Crane has never seen him drunk, unable to perform. But, we are told, Crane worries that, with new responsibilities, Pullman's "drinking problem" will worsen. Why suppose Pullman has a drinking "problem"? What makes drinking alcohol during the day--but not drinking coffee during the day--a "drinking problem" at all? Every drunk begins as a drinker, no doubt, but most drinkers remain drinkers. The correlation between drinker, even heavy drinker, and problem drinker is not strong, unless the correlation is made by definition (for example, by defining as a "problem drinker" anyone who averages more than two drinks a day). Equally important, we are not very good at predicting who will be a good manager. The only reliable way to find out whether Pullman can take the pressure is to give him the chance.

Pullman does have a problem. He likes to drink on the job and his company now has a policy against that. Crane has a problem too. He works for the same company. He knows of a fellow employee who is violating company policy and has (in effect) been asked whether he knows anything that would justify not promoting Pullman. Crane is an engineer. What should he do?

He must, I think, first make up his mind whether he thinks Pullman can handle the job. He must make up his mind about that because Hillman has asked him what he thinks about that, not whether Pullman has a drinking problem. He has referred to the drinking policy and old Curtis' drunkenness to illustrate the sort of thing he had in mind. The "drinking problem" is only a problem if it unfits Pullman for the job.

If Crane believes that it might unfit Pullman for the job, he should say something. Pullman has no right to confidentiality on this. Pullman did not voluntarily reveal his drinking to Crane as a secret between friends. Crane simply smelled Pullman's breath. Crane has but his professional judgment at his employer's disposal. What he is being asked is within his competence (and not morally wrong or contrary to any professional obligation).

If, however, Crane does not think Pullman's drinking unfits him for the job, he can honestly say, "I think he would make a good Head of Quality Control." But he should not stop there. If I were Crane, I would continue in some such way as this: "Since you mentioned shoddy production, I'll give you my professional opinion on that too: we

should be paying more attention to worker complaints about too few rest breaks, bottlenecks on the assembly line, and our failure to design parts for easy assembly. Quality Control is a devilish job the way we've set up the manufacturing process. I'm not surprised old Curtis turned to drink."

An engineer is supposed to be a "faithful agent and trustee" of her employer. Crane's employer is Branch, Inc., not any manager or collection of them. As trustee, he should take into account not only the company's present policies but its longterm welfare. Of course, Crane must be careful not to take too much on himself. He cannot just substitute his judgment for management's. But if, after resolving all reasonable doubts in favor of management, he still believes a certain policy is against his employer's longterm interests, he need not go along with it. He may work against it as best he can (so long as he can do so without lying, deception, or other unethical acts). A faithful trustee will look beyond management fads.