

Henry West's Commentary on "Drinking in the Workplace"

Commentary On
Drinking in the Workplace

I

Whether it is in the context of the workplace or school or personal friendship, intervention to help someone who is thought to have an alcohol or other drug problem is a difficult decision. On the one hand, it is easy to say that it is none of your business or that you risk losing a friend. On the other, if you are a real friend, you may be helping the person to a healthier, happier and more productive life, if your intervention results in the correction of a serious problem.

One of the important variables is how bad is the problem. In the case under discussion, Andy's work is described as always first rate; so his drinking hasn't prevented him from being able to do his job. And he isn't described as being drunk on the job, only as probably having too much to drink the night before and as sneaking a drink during work breaks. These are signs of alcoholism, not just recreational drinking. But many alcoholics are able to carry on their professional work at an adequate level of competence. Andy would feel better in the mornings and probably do an even better job if he were not drinking, but it is only John's "worry" that he would not be able to handle the additional pressures of promotion. There is no firm evidence that he could not.

One way to approach this problem is to think in terms of the Golden Rule. If you were Andy with a drinking problem, would you want John to talk with you about it? If you were in "denial" and refused to recognize that you had a problem, would you still want John to talk with you about it? Would you want him to ask around to see if others think that you have a problem? If he found that they did, would you want him to bring in a group of co-workers to confront you with the fact that others know it whether you admit it or not? Would you want him to contact an alcoholism

counsellor or someone else to talk with you, if he didn't feel comfortable doing it?

Another approach is to try to estimate the consequences of alternative actions. Do you think that John would produce the best consequences by talking with him, by keeping quiet, or by something else?

If John talks with him, he will likely find out more from Andy's reaction, and that may require John to take more action. It may be that Andy will deny that he has a problem, and John must then think about whether he is going to take any further steps. It may be that Andy knows that he has a problem and wants to do something about it. If so, John might need to be prepared to follow up by getting him in contact with an alcoholism counselor or with someone from Alcoholics Anonymous.

If John keeps quiet, how likely is it that Andy's problem will get in the way of his work, whether or not he gets the promotion? John can't know for sure, but will he be doing the best thing for Andy and the company by doing nothing?

What are the other possibilities? Should John inquire privately among other co-workers to see if any of them think that Andy has a drinking problem? Even if done with the best intentions of making a decision whether Andy needs help, could this be construed, by Andy or others, as a sort of talking behind his back? It might start rumors that John doesn't intend to start. But, since John is not the sort of person who feels comfortable discussing such matters with others, John might be able to identify someone who would be better at approaching Andy, or he might find someone who would go with him to talk to Andy. Which would be better--to talk to Andy first, before getting anyone else involved, or to confirm his judgment that Andy has a problem and to get the assistance of others in trying to make Andy realize it? If there is a professional alcoholism counselor accessible to the work force, maybe John should ask his advice, but then that counselor might be required to make a record of the conversation which would work its way onto Andy's record. Is that fair?

II

When John is taken out to lunch, should he volunteer anything about Andy's drinking? It may make a difference if John has already talked with Andy and has more information about Andy's attitude toward his problem. And it may make a difference what the effects of the disclosure would be. On the one hand, to volunteer

the information would probably be a service to the company, in that the plant manager could then make a more informed decision. But if Andy has been doing first rate work and has not actually been drunk on the job, perhaps it is a disloyalty to a friend to report evidence which could lead to his being fired. So one factor is what would be the reaction of the manager. Is there a treatment program for those with drug and alcohol problems, or are they simply dismissed?

It is one thing to volunteer the information. It is another to hide it if asked outright. If John is asked if he has any evidence of Andy having a drinking or drug problem, then he would be lying to deny it. Sometimes lying is justified if the alternatives are horrible. For example, it is usually thought permissible to lie to save an innocent life, such as in hiding someone from the Gestapo. Would this be such an extreme case?



There are two concerns of the union--the invasion of privacy and the unfairness of exempting professionals from mandatory testing. The second looks like a clear case of discrimination. If testing is justified as a way of improving the quality of the non-professional workforce, then some reason should be given why professionals are exempted, and none seems to have been given. But the privacy issue is a difficult one. It may be thought that the company has a right to test its employees as a means of improving performance. But the issue is not so clear.

If the company's policy of sanctions against those found to be working under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs has not prevented absenteeism and shoddy workmanship, there is some question whether drug and alcohol use are the problem and therefore whether random drug testing will answer the problem. A big question is what the company plans to do with the results. Will those who test positive be fired, or be given counseling, or be reported to the police? And what drugs are included? Will recreational users of marijuana be identified and labelled the same as cocaine addicts? Presumably the random "drug" testing is for residues of illegal drugs. If drug users have not been found to be working under the influence, why is testing not a prejudice against socially unacceptable drugs? The company is not testing for residues of alcohol, which is socially accepted. Is this an interference in the private lifestyle of the employees?

Drug addiction is often thought of as an illness. If so, is refusal to employ an addict like discrimination against someone who has some other (non-communicable) illness, such as diabetes or multiple sclerosis?