What to do if you suspect intoxication at work

Do you know how to react when you suspect an employee has been drinking?

When you smell alcohol on an employee, or receive reports that an employee smells of alcohol, you need to act fast to protect everyone’s safety. However, it’s also essential to handle the situation prudently. Accusing someone of being drunk on the job is serious business that could trigger a lawsuit.

Follow these guidelines, which both HR pros and front-line supervisors must be prepared to apply:

**Watch for observable behaviors consistent with cognitive impairment.** These include slurred speech, unsteady balance, an unusual number of mistakes or an inability to focus on job duties. The odor of alcohol may be a clue that someone is impaired, but it’s not proof.

**Share your observations with the employee.** Ask if he or she is OK. State the behaviors that have been observed; then ask if there is a reason. The employee should be given a chance to explain.

**Never make a medical diagnosis.** You’re not a doctor. Never directly accuse an employee of being drunk or high.

**Reiterate the company’s substance abuse policy.** Hand the employee a copy. State that you are not assuming or accusing the employee of being intoxicated, but that you need to be sure the employee clearly understands the policy and the consequences of violating it.

**Make a judgment call.** Assess whether a safety risk exists and the employee needs to be removed from the job. When in doubt, get a second opinion.

**Send the employee home if necessary.** If you believe he or she is intoxicated, arrange for (and pay for) transportation.

**Document the conversation.** Even if the employee is returned to duty, you must keep a record that the employee received a verbal warning about the substance abuse policy.

**Note:** Alcoholism may be an ADA disability, but nothing in the law requires you to tolerate drunkenness at work.