

## Manager fact sheet:

# Responding to concerns about alcohol or drug use at work



Concerns about alcohol or drug use at work can involve safety, performance, conduct and wellbeing considerations. It is important for Managers to respond carefully, based on observable behaviour rather than assumptions, while following organisational policies and procedures.

Alcohol or drug use may affect an employee's ability to work safely, concentrate, make decisions, interact with others or meet role expectations. In some situations, there may be an immediate safety risk that needs to be managed promptly.

### What you may notice

Concerns about alcohol or drug use may be raised because of a specific incident, repeated patterns of behaviour or changes in an employee's wellbeing, performance or conduct.

You may notice:

- changes in appearance, alertness, coordination or speech
- smell of alcohol or signs that an employee may be impaired
- increased errors, reduced concentration or poor decision-making
- changes in attendance, punctuality or unexplained absences
- mood changes, irritability, withdrawal or unusual behaviour
- safety concerns, near misses or incidents
- reduced performance or reliability
- concerns raised by colleagues, clients or customers

These signs do not always mean alcohol or drug use is involved. There may be other health, wellbeing, fatigue or personal factors contributing to the behaviour.

Managers should focus on what they have observed and follow the appropriate workplace process.

### How managers can respond

Managers are not expected to diagnose substance use concerns or provide counselling. The [Manager Assistance Program](#) (MAP) through PeopleSense by Altius provides confidential guidance from a qualified psychologist. MAP can help managers prepare for sensitive conversations, respond to wellbeing concerns, manage the impact on the team and identify practical next steps while maintaining appropriate boundaries.



Reaching out early makes a real difference.  
Contact **PeopleSense** to book a confidential  
appointment with a qualified psychologist.

## How managers can respond

### 1. Focus on observable behaviour

Avoid making assumptions or accusing an employee of alcohol or drug use without evidence. Focus on specific behaviours, incidents or performance concerns you have observed. MAP can help you prepare for a conversation that is factual, respectful and focused on workplace impact rather than judgement.

### 2. Manage immediate safety risks

If there is a concern that an employee may be impaired or unable to work safely, follow your organisation's safety procedures immediately. MAP can help you consider how to communicate calmly and supportively, but safety procedures and organisational policy should guide immediate action.

### 3. Speak with the employee privately

Where appropriate, have a private conversation with the employee as soon as practicable. Explain what has been observed, why there is a concern and what the next steps will be. Keep the discussion calm, factual and respectful. MAP can help you plan what to say, how to respond if the employee becomes distressed or defensive, and how to keep the conversation on track.

### 4. Avoid trying to diagnose the issue

Alcohol or drug use concerns may be linked to stress, trauma, pain, mental health concerns, personal difficulties or dependency. Your role is not to diagnose or investigate personal circumstances unless the employee chooses to share them. MAP can help you understand how to listen, maintain boundaries and encourage appropriate professional support.

### 5. Document concerns clearly

Keep accurate, factual records of what was observed, when it occurred, who was involved, what actions were taken and any follow-up required. Avoid assumptions or subjective statements. MAP can help you think through the wellbeing and communication aspects of your response, while your organisation's HR or safety team can advise on formal documentation requirements.

### 6. Offer support where appropriate

If the employee discloses that they are experiencing personal, health or substance use difficulties, respond with care and encourage them to access confidential support through [PeopleSense by Altius](#) or another appropriate service. MAP can help you raise support options sensitively and understand how to support the employee while maintaining workplace expectations.

### 7. Balance support with accountability

It is possible to be supportive while still addressing safety, performance or conduct concerns. Be clear about expectations, next steps and any required follow-up. MAP can help you prepare for conversations that balance compassion with clear boundaries and operational requirements.

### 8. Consider the impact on the team

Substance use concerns may affect colleagues, particularly if there has been a safety incident, conflict, increased workload or a loss of trust. Managers may need to reinforce expectations, manage workload impacts or support affected employees. MAP can help you consider how to support the broader team while respecting privacy and confidentiality.

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