

## **When a Colleague is Abusing Alcohol**

By Mary Mitchell

The lovely dinner meeting with my colleague turned out to be a bad dream. Sure, we had wine with the meal. I loved every moment, morsel and drop of it. Yet I was poorly prepared when she not only had wine, but slugged down cognac afterward, and commented that she had preceded our meeting with "a couple of Scotches."

I ended up taking her keys and checking her into the hotel that housed the restaurant where we dined. It all seemed like a dramatic hassle - and then I realized it wasn't over. I had to face this woman again. And what would I say when I did?

It can be a painful experience to watch an associate or friend behave badly after having one too many at a business function or the local watering hole.

So I turned to Todd Whitmer, senior executive officer of the Caron Foundation, a nationally recognized non-profit addiction treatment center, for advice on how to help my colleague avoid alcohol-related career suicide - or worse.

### **Talk About How Their Actions Made You Feel**

Work is one of the last places a drinking problem will surface, Whitmer says. But friends and colleagues are likely to know someone is having a problem with alcohol before the boss does, and can help steer him or her away from danger. Whitmer suggests these steps:

If your friend could endanger herself, intervene. Take the car keys, call a cab, or look her in the eye and ask her to leave with you.

Otherwise, wait until she is sober before you try talking to her. Be specific about what you observed, without accusing. For example, instead of "You were really drunk last night," try "I felt embarrassed about the joke you told last night. You don't ordinarily talk like that. Maybe you had too much to drink."

Use "I" language; express your feelings such as alarm, fear, and sadness, not what you think is happening to the other person. "Although he may argue, he can't deny your feelings," Whitmer says.

Express your concern for your colleague and offer to provide feedback when you see the problem surfacing. Talk to her before the next company gathering, and let her know you will signal when you sense inappropriate behavior coming on.

### **Offer Help, Not Counseling**

For example, "The last time all the managers went out for a drink after the strategic planning meeting, I was afraid, after the third drink, that your remarks about the boss were going to get you into trouble. I'm feeling some anxiety about tonight's business dinner. If I sense you're getting into dangerous territory, I'm going to give you that feedback. Does that make sense to you? When I say, 'Remember what we talked about yesterday?', that's the red flag."

Avoid the role of counselor. You can certainly show compassion and express your concern, but don't hesitate to say, "I'm not in a position to counsel you about what's going on."

If your company has an employee assistance program, steer her in that direction. If that resource is unavailable, suggest contacting an alcoholism information and treatment center.

**Don't Just Look The Other Way**

Sometimes being kind means being tough when you protect fellow workers. It's not easy to speak up to someone who is self-destructing with alcohol - or any other substance. Still, it's the right thing to do.

Don't ever turn your eyes from a difficult situation like this. We need to take care of each other. We are, after all, in this life together. Thus, we all deserve respect, both in the giving and the getting.