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Recovery-Friendly Workplaces: Aligning Empathy, Accountability, and Business Performance

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When I first began exploring what it meant to operate as a recovery-friendly workplace, I wondered Presponsible for safety, performance standards, and accountability, and I did not want to create ambiguity around those expectations. The hesitation is understandable. Leaders are already balancing policy enforcement and the day-to-day realities of managing people. Introducing the idea of becoming a recovery-friendly workplace can raise legitimate questions: Will this create confusion about expectations? Could it expose the organization to additional liability? How should supervisors respond when substance use or recovery issues intersect with workplace performance? In my experience, most employers are not resistant to the concept itself; they are simply looking for a way to approach it that preserves clear standards while supporting a stable and productive workforce.

In practice, the shift is less about changing policy and more about how leaders respond when these issues arise in the workplace. Recovery-friendly workplaces do not require compromising expectations; they require leaders who are equipped to apply those standards consistently while allowing for clear, structured pathways when employees are actively working toward recovery.

For that approach to be effective, leaders have to establish a consistent foundation from the very beginning with every employee. From the first conversation with a new hire—or when stepping into a new leadership role—expectations around performance, safety, and honesty must be clearly established. Just as importantly, that clarity must also extend to what employees can expect in return. In my own conversations, I often begin with a simple principle: I believe in honesty. That means addressing issues directly, but also creating an environment where

concerns can be raised early without immediate escalation. This clarity reduces uncertainty and encourages communication before problems grow. When concerns do surface, effective leaders respond directly and appropriately, gathering information before reacting and addressing behavior before it escalates. In this context, empathy is not about avoiding consequences or lowering expectations; it is the ability to apply judgment under pressure in a way that protects both the individual and the organization.

These principles were applied within my own workplace over a six-year period, during which their operational impact became measurable. From 2019 through 2024, the organization recorded zero lost-time injuries, while overall safety incidents were reduced by approximately 75 percent. During the first two years of implementing recovery-friendly practices, efficiency improved from below 90 percent to consistently exceeding 100 percent. Product quality also improved, with reject rates declining from approximately 4 percent to 2 percent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and stabilizing again by 2023. These outcomes were not the result of relaxed standards, but of earlier intervention, clearer expectations, and more consistent supervisory engagement. The impact also extended beyond the walls of the workplace, both within the community and at the individual level. More than a dozen local businesses adopted recovery-friendly workplace practices following this example, supported by partnerships with recovery organizations, educational institutions, and local law enforcement. At the individual level, employees in recovery consistently demonstrated reliability, growth, and leadership potential, with several advancing into supervisory roles and becoming contributors to the broader business and recovery community. In many cases, that same progress carried into their personal lives, with individuals regaining driver's licenses, securing stable transportation, restoring custody of their children, and rebuilding their lives. These outcomes reinforced a consistent pattern: when supported with clear expectations, empathy, and accountability, recovery is not a liability within the workforce, but a measurable strength.

Viewed through a business lens, this data is not just an indicator of success; it translates directly into reduced operational strain. Productivity losses, safety exposure, quality issues, and the need for constant supervisory intervention all carry measurable cost, even when they are not tracked directly. In many organizations, these challenges are accepted as part of doing business. The experience outlined here demonstrates otherwise. When leadership practices create clarity, consistency, and early visibility into issues, organizations are better positioned to maintain performance, control risk, and protect both their workforce and their resources.

These outcomes are achievable, but they are not automatic. Employers often encounter a few common challenges when working to build a recovery-friendly workplace. The first is stigma, where individuals in recovery are viewed through a narrow lens that defines them by past behavior rather than present capability. This perception can lead to missed opportunities, inconsistent decision-making, and a reluctance to fully integrate recovery into the workforce. Addressing this requires intentional leadership. Consistent repetition of the organization's mission helps normalize recovery as part of the workplace, while providing employees with the opportunity to work alongside individuals who are actively and successfully engaged in recovery allows perceptions to shift through direct experience rather than assumption. The second challenge is support. Many leaders want to do the right thing but are unsure how to respond in complex situations, often feeling as though they have to navigate these issues on their own. In reality, effective recovery-

friendly workplaces are not built in isolation, but through connections with community organizations, recovery support networks, and structured relationships that provide guidance when situations fall outside of routine leadership decisions. A third challenge is overconfidence. As processes become familiar, it is easy to assume that similar situations should be handled the same way. In my own experience, there was a time when I treated a situation as routine when it required a more thoughtful response, and that decision contributed to enabling behavior rather than addressing it appropriately. That experience reinforced the importance of pausing, evaluating each situation on its own merits, and seeking input when needed. Employers do not have to navigate this alone. Organizations such as Recovery Friendly New Jersey provide structured support, resources, and guidance to help employers implement these practices in a way that balances accountability with support. *(I encourage every business leader to take advantage of this important resource, as doing so not only strengthens your workplace, but it also reduces costs. Research shows individuals in long-term recovery are likely to be some of your most hard-working and most loyal employees, with the ability to assist formally and informally in maintaining a healthier and safer workplace environment.)*

As we prepare for National Recovery Month in September, there is an opportunity to move beyond awareness and consider how recovery-friendly principles can strengthen day-to-day leadership practices within the workplace and extend their impact beyond it. This is not a symbolic effort, but a practical one that supports workforce stability, performance, and long-term organizational health. Over time, that impact becomes visible not only in operations, but in how individuals communicate, respond to challenges, and support one another. When leaders create environments grounded in clarity, consistency, empathy, and accountability, employees carry those expectations into their personal lives, fostering more stable communication and increasing the likelihood that challenges are addressed early, even within their own families. In that way, recovery-friendly leadership extends beyond response and into prevention, shaping environments where individuals are better positioned to succeed both at work and at home. Ultimately, drug-free and recovery-friendly principles are not in conflict; they are most effective when aligned through disciplined empathy and consistent, accountable leadership.

About the Author: Mark S. Bonta is a SHRM-SCP certified HR professional and author of *Empathetic Leader: Nurturing Growth in a Recovery Informed Environment*. As an operations leader with more than 20 years of experience in manufacturing workforce development and former plant director, he has led large-scale teams, implemented inclusive hiring practices, and driven measurable improvements in productivity, safety, and retention. Mark played a pioneering role in the Recovery Friendly Workplace (RFW) movement and continues to advise employers on integrating empathy, accountability, and operational excellence into workplace culture.

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