Performance Enhancing Drugs (Nootropics) in the Workplace: Ethical Leadership Issues for Management

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ABSTRACT

In today’s fast-paced, competitive, business climate, a focus on strong, consistent performance is the key to individual and organizational success. As organizations seek to hire, retain, and promote their best performers, some employees may utilize nootropics, performance enhancing drugs (PED), to enhance their accomplishments. These PEDs or Nootropics can include items such as caffeine as well as prescription medications such as Adderall, Concerta, and Ritalin that can improve cognitive function and assist workplace performance.

The objectives of this study were to 1) review the reasons for use of PED in the workplace; 2) describe the groups of employees who might use a PED; 3) analyze the ethical viewpoints of employees on usage of PED; 4) develop ethical leadership strategies for management to deal with this challenging issue.

The results showed that employees used PED for a variety of reasons including to improve concentration, enhance performance, improve productivity, work more efficiently, and to increase their time on task. The negatives of using PED included a variety of individual and organizational demands for performance.

Both high ambition and low ambition employees have used PED for specific reasons. High ambition employees used a PED for its competitive advantages while low ambition employees use it as a short cut to succeed.

Sixty-four percent of respondents (senior level college students) felt that the use of a PED would be ethical to use to perform better in the workplace. With this in mind, there are specific ethical leadership strategies that management can utilize to better analyze and adjust to PED in the workplace, a workplace inhabited by a new generation.

Keywords: Nootropics, Performance Enhancing Drugs, Ethical Leadership, Management, Workplace Performance

INTRODUCTION

The business climate today is performance based where consistent, high levels of performances are expected from all employees and rewarded through salary, bonus, and promotion. Organizations today have major concerns about developing a culture of workplace integrity and exhibiting ethical leadership. A climate of honesty, trust, and fairness have become important components of an organization’s commitment to workers, to their customers, to their stakeholders, and to their community. Concomitantly, as employer established workplace performance norms have increased, employees’ level of performance expectations have increased. This leads to more stress on employees to perform, while having to arrive early, as well as to work late to be a competitive employee meeting employer expectations.
Today's organizations are more competitive to gain employment, (to obtain a position), are more performance oriented (to retain the position), and are more performance based (to advance in a position). Thus, employees are expected to perform larger quantities of work at a high quality level. Since individual employees have different work capacities, these performance capacities are not equally shared by all workers. This can lead to employees who enhance their individual workplace performance through the use of performance-enhancing drugs (PED) called nootropics to stay ahead of their peers or to be competitive in meeting workplace demands. These may be individual prescribed nootropics or those obtained without a prescription. These PEDs or nootropics can include items such as caffeine as well as prescription medications such as Adderall, Concerta, and Ritalin that can improve cognitive function and assist workplace performance.

RESEARCH STUDY OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study were to 1) review the reasons for use of PED in the workplace; 2) describe the groups of employees who might use a PED; 3) analyze the ethical viewpoints of employees on usage of PED; 4) develop ethical leadership strategies for management to deal with this challenging issue.

OBJECTIVE 1: REVIEW THE REASONS FOR NOOTROPICS IN THE WORKPLACE

There are a number of reasons nootropics are used in today's workplace. To enhance their workplace performance and become the super worker needed and promoted by the organization, employees may turn to cognitive enhancing nootropics. The main reason some workers may turn to these nootropics (PED) is to improve their performance, to increase their work capacity, and to enhance their productivity due to organizational demands and co-worker competition.

Bruhl and Sahakian (2016) stated that as demands on working people change, cognitive abilities were becoming more important. Since many workplace factors negatively impact cognition, an increasing number of healthy people are reporting the use of performance enhancing drugs as cognitive enhancers to maintain or to improve work performance. This was supported by Cederstrom (2016) who reported meta-analysis by researchers at Harvard Medical School and Oxford showed significant cognitive benefits from cognitive enhancers.

Since an individual's success in the organization is based on the quality and quantity of their performance, to work more effectively, PED may be used as a workplace enhancer. According to Franke et al. (2014) nootropics have been shown to enhance concentration, to increase attention, and to increase cognitive speed. This translates to a higher level of productivity. These factors will improve the worker's performance and meet organizational goals for increased performance expectations.

The negative impacts of nootropics can be brought about by the increasing workplace demands of many organizations. These negatives can include information overload, unreal expectations of performance, addiction, and doing whatever it takes to get ahead.

These changing expectations of performance, can make the new norm in an organization that if one person cheats and uses nootropics then we all must cheat to improve our performance and catch our supervisor's attention and positive support. Pham (2012) believed that the increased use of nootropics in the workplace should lead to further discussion and possible regulation.
OBJECTIVE 2: WHO MIGHT USE NOOTROPICS (PED)

According to Littman and Littman (2015), there can be a classification of two groups who have a higher probability of using PEDs in today's workforce. One group would be those with high ambition who want to gain advantage in their professional life and in their opportunities for promotion. A second group would be those with low ambition, who want a shortcut to be more effective with less work or to reduce their job boredom.

NOOTROPICS USAGE DATA

Bruhl and Shakian (2016) reported an increasing number of healthy people are using cognitive-enhancing drugs, as well as other interventions to maintain or improve work performance. Mazzitti and Sullivan EAP (2017) described that prescription drugs have played a larger and larger role in workplace–related substance abuse referrals over the past five to ten years. Understanding PED drugs in the workplace is especially important because of its use and possible abuse as a performance enhancing drug by some professionals.

The Addition Center Newsletter (February, 2018) stated the rate for prescriptions for Adderall have tripled from 2008 to 2012. In 2012 16 million prescriptions were written.

Data from the Vector One: National and Total Patient Tracker (TPT) Database (2013) showed Adderall’s largest group of users was between 25 to 44 years old with 1,963,914 people, 18 to 24 years old had 893,560, and 45 to 64 years old had 785,635. This data does not include similar type pharmaceuticals.

The largest growth has been in adults, 21 and over, with a higher concentration among women.

OBJECTIVE 3: ANALYSIS OF THE ETHICAL VIEWPOINTS OF EMPLOYEES ON USAGE OF PED

Research Findings

A group of business students enrolled in a Senior Seminar in Leadership Ethics at an urban college were studied to gather data on their perceived ethical view of using nootropics (PED’s) in the workplace. One of the stated questions used in the study was as follows “Briefly explain if you feel that performance-enhancing drugs like Adderall would be ethical to use to perform better in the workplace.”

Sixty-four percent of the students agreed that it would be ethical and acceptable to use performance-enhancing drugs in the workplace. Their comments included a number of issues from individual performance level to those considered pressure from an organizational level. Since this group agreed that there were no specific rules against the usage of performance-enhancing drugs, it would make them a better performer in improving their quality and quantity of work. This would lead to being considered a better, more valued employee.

Furthermore, they consider the usage acceptable since it is an individual decision and it does not harm other coworkers. At the organization level, since there were typically no written rules against the use of nootropics in the workplace, its usage would be acceptable.

This supportive group tended to look at the issue in a narrower, individualistic way. Their view was that using nootropics would help them personally and professionally in their position.
Thirty-six percent felt that the use of performance-enhancing drugs in the workplace would be unethical. Their comments looked at issues such as nootropics’ impact on other people, a skewed performance level for themselves, and the possible health consequences, such as addiction, that would impact the usage.

This group tending to look at the issue in a broader manner by thinking about the organization, fairness to others, and justice first. Although they weighted the health consequences as well as performance factors, they believed nootropics usage in the workplace was unethical.

**OBJECTIVE 4: ETHICAL LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH EMPLOYEES PED USAGE**

**Business Ethics**

Ferrell, Fraedrich, Ferrell (2017) defined business ethics as comprising organizational principles, values, and norms that may originate from individuals, organizations or from the legal system that primarily guide individual and group behavior in business. Business ethics is a concept that guides the individual and the organization to make the best choices for all.

Ethics can be the most valuable tool in the decision making process providing the necessary structure and guidance. Turner (2016) cited that ethics in project and business need not be a threat but an opportunity to differentiate yourself from the competition and exploit some form of competitive advantage. The idea of competitive advantage is valuable in the business environment faced by organizations today and can assist in employee recruitment and retention.

**Leadership**

Dubrin (2016) defined leadership as the ability to inspire support and confidence among the people who are needed to achieve organizational goals. Daft (2015) clarified leadership as an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intent real changes and outcomes that reflect their shared purpose.

**Ethical Leadership**

Ethical leadership according to Littman and Littman (2017) is the continuous practice of having a positive influence on decisions that will be right and appropriate in supporting proper actions in any situation that impacts the greater good. This would guide the ethical leader to appropriate decisions.

Brown et al (2006) stated that ethical leadership is the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal; relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers thought two-way communications, reinforcement, and decision making. Thus, a leader is a role model of ethical behavior.

Clarifying ethical leadership is important to management and employees. Ethical leadership must be supported by a strong leader’s organizational vision, moral character, and communication skills.

According to Bello (2012), leaders must create an ethically friendly work environment for all employees, communicate ethical issues, serve as role models, and put mechanisms in place for the development of responsible employees. It is expected that leaders who exhibit ethical behavior would be more likely to consider needs and rights of their employees and treat them fairly.
Ethical Leadership Strategies

Ethical leadership is a critical form of leadership action. These actions lead to higher levels of productivity, stronger service quality, better quality decision-making, more trusting environment, better communications, and increased flexibility from stakeholders. The leader’s actions and the methods in which they are communicated are the stepping stones to acing on the issue of nootropics in the workplace.

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP: SIX INTERNAL FACTORS

A leader’s personal beliefs and values are the clear determination of their character leading to their actions. The six key values most important to an ethical leader are responsibility, respect, fairness, honesty, courage, and kindness.

Responsibility is our duty to take ownership of the decisions and actions we make or fail to make and their resulting consequences. This concept highlights the accountability and decision making authority of leaders over the resources necessary to complete a project. Without taking ownership, the task will not be carried out to its successful conclusion.

Respect is our duty to show a high regard for ourselves, others, and the resources entrusted to us that include people, money, reputation, the safety of others and natural or environmental resources. This concept highlights the support we provide and the credit we give as leaders over the resources necessary to complete a project. It allows leaders to place a value and importance on the tasks and responsibility of employees. It allows employees to feel valued and appreciated in their contributions.

Fairness is our duty to make decision transparently and act objectively without any partiality, bias, self-interest, or prejudice. This concept highlights the importance of valuing each group members input in any decision. This would be done to reduce conflicts and resolve issues in an impartial manner. It allows employees members to know their contributions are considered equally with others.

Honesty is our duty to understand the truth and act in a truthful manner. This concept highlights the using and sharing of information as well as how that information is shared and communicated with relevant groups. Providing timely and accurate information is critical to employee success. Honesty is the key driver of any action and decision as without honesty, nothing else matters.

Courage is the ability to stand up for what is right. This concept highlights the ability and follow thought of having strength of convictions and passion for doing the right thing. Courage is an important factor in making the right decision given a variety of sometime difficult situations. It allows the ethical leader to complete their responsibilities consistently.

Kindness is the way we treat others, our concern for others, and the belief in the goodness of all. This concepts highlights the best strategy to get people together and feel as a contributor to the process necessary to complete the project. A leader’s belief in the competency of their team member and their concern for the team member’s well-being is critical for strong team performance.

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP: EXTERNAL FACTORS

A leader and members of an organization are strongly influenced by the corporate culture. The corporate culture is clearly defined by a detailed Code of Conduct or Code of Ethics. These Codes specify actions that are considered acceptable or unacceptable in practice. A thorough knowledge of these Codes and then disseminating them to all team members is a requirement of the US Government as well as the human resource leadership of an organization. All team members must be well versed and follow all components of corporate ethics.
A second external force impacting ethical leaders are government mandates or policies that guide decision within the confines of societal norms and legal regulations. These policies specify the actions which are considered as standard business behavior. Ethical leaders clearly follow these guidelines in their daily personal and project actions. They serve as the role model of ethical actions.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP DECISION MAKING**

According to Demirtas (2015), ethical leadership has both a direct and indirect influence on work engagement as well as organizational misbehavior. This reinforces the key role that the leader plays in sending the message of the importance of honesty and fairness in dealing with employees and in dealing with work-related situations.

**Six Leadership Strategies**

As previously stated, there are six ethical leadership strategies that will lead to successfully dealing with nootropics in the workplace. They are as follows:

1) Create clear, realistic, attainable employee performance goals. (Responsibility)
2) Be supportive; value and respect employee needs. (Respect)
3) Be fair and clearly define performance evaluation criteria. (Fairness)
4) Utilize a two-way communication model for expectations of employees and of organizational goals. (Honesty)
5) Do what is right in all situations. (Courage)
6) Utilize the capabilities and experience of each employee. (Kindness)

Ethical leadership can be the guiding force to overcome the possible encroachment of nootropics in our employee’s daily routine. Ethical leaders can face this challenge if they treat their employees correctly, serve as a positive role model in decision making, and set realistic expectations.

Two-way communication is vital to organizational, individual, and leader success. Open channels between leaders and employees is mandatory to develop goals and accomplish the task. The ability to share the vision and ideas, listen, and provide feedback is necessary in the achievement of organizational success.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Nootropics (PED) usage has continued to grow in all aspects of the business world. Since more individuals are using nootropics to perform at a high level to meet the individual pressure they put on themselves as well as the organizational pressure they face, this is a vital area of concern to management and to organizational leaders. An ethical leader must be prepared to acknowledge and respond to the challenges their employees face.

Students believe that use of nootropics is ethical and individual. They believe nootropics usage can have a positive impact on their performance and on their future success. They are less likely to see the problems that nootropics may cause.

As an ethical leader dealing with a new generation of employees, it is important to follow rules that focus on people first. An ethical leadership strategy can be a competitive strategy to recruit and retain workers. Following the six strategies above along, with two way communication on organizational goals and issues, will help a new generation of employees perform in an acceptable manner. This will help employees see the ethics of enhanced productivity through teamwork and organizational support working together more naturally than employees individually using nootropics.
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