

Reference document

Employees in difficulty



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Intervening effectively with employees in difficulty: winning strategies for managers

Introduction

Absenteeism has been on the rise for several years. One of the main causes is the major increase in “subjective” illnesses, particularly those related to mental health (one of every two absences according to the World Health Organization [WHO]). Moreover, the WHO has indicated that by 2020, major depression will cost more than any other illness, including cancer.

The origin of this phenomenon can be attributed to a set of factors including rapid changes in technology, increased stress (at work and at home), population aging, etc.

This increase in the absenteeism rate obviously has major financial impacts on organizations, their employees and society in general. Human “costs” are also significant, since personnel are the company’s primary resource.

Preventing absenteeism

Prevention is the main factor in reducing absenteeism costs. There are three main levels of prevention: primary (e.g. education, management and health maintenance programs), secondary (e.g. employee assistance programs [EAP] and tertiary (e.g. disability and rehabilitation management programs).

When primary prevention methods are not available or are unsuccessful in preventing a problem that could keep employees from reporting to work, intervention by the managers often makes it possible to avoid a deteriorating situation and an eventual work stoppage.

Main risk factors

Before tackling the specific signs for detecting a potential problem, as well as the strategies for employee intervention, it is important to remember that certain individuals and organizations are more at risk of encountering an absenteeism problem. In both cases, targeted awareness and education activities can reduce the severity of the problem. In both cases, targeted awareness and education activities can reduce the severity of the problem.

Main risk factors for individuals:

- Negative affect (excessively emotional response to negative stimuli)
- Type A personality (ambition, perfectionism, competitiveness, and need for control)
- Lack of nerve (rarely seeks out challenges, fear of risk)
- Natural pessimism/negativity (glass half empty)
- Inadequate coping strategies (dependencies, poor time management, rigidity, great need for support, unwise lifestyle habits, difficult interpersonal relationships).

Main risk factors for the organization:

- Poorly trained or ill-prepared employees
- Redundant and monotonous tasks
- Ambiguous roles
- Unhealthy environment
- Difficult schedules
- High stress level
- Lack of clear policies and directives regarding absenteeism

Detection of a problem that could lead to an absence

Managers are usually very well placed to detect a problem that could lead to an absence. By regularly observing and interacting with employees, attentive and concerned managers can recognize the preliminary signs of a disability requiring them to intervene. For example:

- Frequent absences and tardiness
- Drop in productivity
- Increased errors
- Drop in motivation
- Increased work accidents
- Difficulty concentrating and remembering
- Complaints of fatigue
- Neglected appearance and/or personal hygiene
- Impatience, increased and unusual irritability
- Lack of co-operation
- Crying
- Isolation
- Interpersonal problems
- Inappropriate work posture
- Weight gain or loss
- Any other worrisome and observable behaviour change

Before intervening

In general, to help the organization reduce its rate of absenteeism, managers should, as often as possible:

- Try to stay in a good mood
- Set the example by trying not to be absent
- Value their employees' presence at work
- Take interest in the employees
- Recognize their contribution
- Show flexibility in some situations, whenever possible

When intervening

Without having taken a specialized training course in psychosocial intervention, managers must be well prepared and capable of approaching in an adequate way an employee at risk of taking off work. A gaffe due to a lack of skill or of tact could do more harm than good.

Consequently, when intervening with a vulnerable person, it is important to:

- Listen and show understanding (Take the time to listen attentively and understand the person's point of view; check to make sure you understand.)
- Show empathy (Know how to understand how the person feels, free of any value judgment.)
- Be genuine (Be yourself; don't play a role.)
- Respect confidentiality (Respect the person and what she is facing, as well as the private nature of this real-life experience.)
- Be fair (Try to treat all employees equally.)

- Show acceptance/trust (Give the benefit of the doubt, accept the facts presented and refrain from interpreting or moralizing.)
- Be informative (Ask questions if necessary before giving information, refer back to the employee's experience, take the time to explain things well, shed light on mental health problems and break the stigma, because mental health issues affect 20% of the population. Use assistance programs, because everybody might need them.)
- Demonstrate accountability (Encourage the employee to act and become actively involved in the search for solutions, to conquer passivity; ask what can be done?)
- Be vigilant to avoid conflicts of interest
- Be serious and firm, but always gently!
- If not, refer the employees to Human Resources, and give HR a heads up. In such an event, follow up on a reasonable basis (e.g. weekly) until the meeting has been confirmed.
- If the employees are willing to be open, take the time to determine the best service to refer them to:
 - **Human Resources:** interpersonal work conflict, harassment, loss of motivation (lack of challenges, difficulty keeping pace, loss of interest), lack of co-operation, ergonomic problem
 - **Physician:** pain, fatigue, attention/concentration/memory problem, difficulties with vagueness/uncertainty, discomfort/physical/psychological ailments, obesity, weight loss, diabetes, respiratory problems, cardiovascular problems, insomnia, medication (addiction/side effects), repeated work accidents
 - **EAP:** marital/family/financial/legal problems, stress, anxiety, depression, addictions (alcohol, drugs, gambling)
- In such an event, follow up on a reasonable basis (e.g. weekly) until the meeting has been confirmed.

The specific role of managers

- Listen carefully
- Pay attention to signs that make it possible to detect a problem requiring intervention
- Trust their intuition in detecting employees at risk of missing work (increase in signs/absences, change in behaviour/attitude during the past six months)
- Discreetly invite an at-risk employee to a meeting. Example of a **first approach**: "I noticed recently that you were showing signs that worried us." (Avoid going too much into detail and justifying yourself.) Just give one or two examples, if necessary, and anticipate the meeting: "I would like to meet with you briefly about this."
- If there is a conflict or too much uneasiness, or a possible conflict of interest, refer employees to Human Resources, where they can receive help from a person of their choosing, and give HR a heads up. In such an event, follow up on a reasonable basis (e.g. weekly) until the meeting has been confirmed.
- **Meeting:** Be in a good emotional state, be open-minded, choose the best possible time and place. Specify the reason for the meeting: **high absenteeism rate** or **signs** that make you worry about a possible absence, and ask the employees if they would like to talk to you about it.

Conclusion

With this kind of preventive approach, which aims to recognize the preliminary signs of a disability and then know how to approach and support an employee in difficulty, managers are often able to reduce their employees' absenteeism. In addition, such an approach usually allows them to reduce the time spent on managing problems within their work team, by ensuring that their employees are healthier, more productive and more appreciative.

The following resources can also be helpful for an employee in difficulty:

- Browse the FAQ
- Take advantage of Tandem
- Turn to your company's EAP
- Confide in a qualified professional in case of emergency