

The boss's dilemma: managing sick employees

Employees calling in sick are a fact of everyday business life – especially during cold and flu season. But too many absences can cause problems for organizations, especially smaller companies in which every employee plays a vital role and wears multiple hats.

While most of us prefer to tough out a cold, that's not always good for business. More than half – 51 per cent – of workers come to work when they're under the weather, according to a recent Accountemps survey. And when they arrive at the office, 57 per cent of other employees worry about being exposed to the illness, and only 11 per cent are impressed by their co-worker's dedication.

Then there are those employees who take every single sick day they're entitled to – and often more – when they don't necessarily need them. Some may feel they're entitled to use their sick day allotment while others use sick days for other reasons, such as childcare issues. In these cases, co-workers often have to assume extra work to keep the department running smoothly, which eventually leads to resentment and lost productivity.

For managers, it can feel like walking a tightrope: encouraging some employees to take a sick day while discouraging others. But it *can* be done.

Discouraging heroes

Let those workers who stagger into work coughing and sneezing know that while you greatly appreciate their dedication, you prefer that they stay home and recuperate rather than get worse working. Emphasize that the organization can't afford the entire department out sick because one person has spread a bad cold.

- **Send the sick person home.** No excuses.
- **Allow flexible work arrangements.** Allow people to work from home. It's better to have them working sick from home than working sick at the office.
- **Stress good self-care.** If your organization is holding a free flu shot clinic, encourage your team to take advantage of it and allow time for them to do so. Otherwise, allow time off for your employees to get flu shots from their health care providers.
- **Lead by example.** When it comes to working sick, managers are often the worst offenders – either because of workload, meetings or expectations. Do not soldier through a cold. If you must continue working, do so from home and teleconference as needed. Your employees will appreciate your consideration in not spreading sickness, and will follow your lead.

Discouraging abuse

An employee who habitually exceeds their sick days allowance may not be intentionally trying to abuse the system. They may just need to understand that sick days are intended to help prevent loss of wages due to short-term personal injury or illness only. Therefore, when discussing what you feel are excessive absences, make sure your employees understand the following:

- That it is in their best interest to use sick days wisely because it's important to have sufficient sick days available in case they experience a serious illness or injury.
- That their absences negatively affect operations and morale as well as their professional reputations and future career aspirations.

- That if they are dealing with a serious health condition or personal crisis, direct them to available resources, such as Human Resources or their Employee Assistance Program.

Again, consider flexible work arrangements. These allow employees to continue working despite having to be at home because of childcare or other personal issues.

Things to consider

When reviewing an employee's history, a number of factors may indicate that sick days are being abused or that there are other concerns. Look for consistent patterns in when sick days are taken, including:

- on Mondays or Fridays
- on days before or after a holiday
- after a vacation request was denied
- when difficult assignments or projects are scheduled or due
- after discipline for a performance issue
- their supervisor is on vacation

Identifying patterns of behavior can help you uncover hidden problems that could possibly affect productivity, such as job dissatisfaction, workplace conflicts and workload issues.

By setting clear expectations for all staff regarding sick leave, every member of your team will understand their rights and responsibilities in helping create and maintain a healthy and productive organization.

Managing an employee with an addiction problem

Contrary to what we may think, not all addicts live on the fringes of society. In fact, more than 75 percent are employed. Most hide their alcohol or drug abuse from their employers until their addiction starts to interfere with their everyday functioning – and that's when everyone starts paying a price. Alcohol and drug addiction cost employers \$24.3 billion a year in:

- absenteeism
- sick leave
- errors and lack of productivity
- disability claims
- benefit costs
- insurance claims
- overtime pay for other staff having to carry extra workload
- accidents (workers' compensation claims. replacing damaged equipment and litigation)

And it's not just alcohol and illegal drugs that contribute to this cost. Addiction to, and misuse of, prescription medication is a rising concern.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help through a variety of resources. Call your EAP at **1 866 468-9461** or visit shepell.com.

Know the signs

Often, problems with drugs or alcohol first appear as performance or attendance issues. Some of the signs may include:

- increase in absences, especially on Mondays and Fridays
- extended lunch breaks, long absences from the work station, consistently late arrivals to work or early departures
- falling productivity, increased errors or missed deadlines
- presenteeism, or difficulty with focus or concentration
- change in appearance
- changes in attitude and behavior or increased irritability

Addressing the situation

It is important to confront an employee about a suspected substance abuse problem as soon as possible, not only to prevent further deterioration in performance, but also to help the individual seek immediate treatment. Most organizations now view substance abuse problems as health problems and manage them as such.

1. **Know your organization's policy.** Become familiar with what the policy permits and prohibits and the penalties for violations.
2. **Know your role.** As a manager, your role is to help improve job performance, document work problems and successes, and effectively implement your organization's policies and programs. You are *not* expected to diagnose or to counsel.
3. **Document.** Job performance problems and other work-related conduct needs to be documented. This should include the names of people involved, times, dates, what occurred, names of witnesses and what actions were taken. Always keep in mind that not all problems are related to alcohol and other drugs.
4. **Gather resources.** Contact your Employee Assistance Program to fully understand the services available to both the employee and you. This will allow you to give your employee a place to begin dealing with his or her issue.
5. **Meet with the employee.** Make an appointment at a time when you think you will be able to discuss the problem without distractions. Choose a location that is private yet informal where you can both feel more relaxed. Maintain a nonjudgmental attitude; this will help keep the lines of communication open and facilitate a good manager-employee relationship. Do not become emotional, threatening, angry or accusing. Instead, ask for, listen to and respond to the employee's input.

Describe your observations ("I noticed you lost your temper with Jane twice in the past few days...") or performance concerns ("I counted three serious errors this week and four last week..."). Emphasize the impact that the behavior or poor performance is having on the organization and other employees. Emphasize that correcting the problem is not a question of "if" but rather "how" and "by when."

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HEALTHY WORKING

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If the employee becomes defensive, stay focused on job performance and conduct. The goal of the meeting is to discuss and find solutions to a job performance problem. Remember that while it is important to be understanding, it is not your job to counsel the employee about his or her personal problems. If the employee is unsure of what the next step should be, direct him or her to your EAP for professional, confidential help. Agree on the actions the employee will take and schedule a follow-up session to review progress. Document and review with the employee.

- 6. Follow-up.** Before your follow-up meeting(s) with the employee, review the employee's progress and decide what steps to take from there. If the employee's job performance and conduct has improved, no further action needs to be taken. However, you should continue to monitor his or her progress until you are sure problems have been resolved completely.

If job performance or conduct has not improved as agreed, or if the employee refuses to acknowledge or correct his or her behavior, document these events and tell the employee the actions you will take next as outlined in your organization's policies.

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