“The Role of the Supervisor in Managing Absenteeism”
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According to a recent CCH Unscheduled Absence Survey, employers are losing ground when it comes to keeping workers on the job. Unscheduled absenteeism rates have risen to their highest level since 1999. What continues to be of most concern is that almost two out of three employees who don’t show up for work aren’t physically ill.

For most companies, the responsibility for managing absenteeism has fallen primarily on immediate supervisors. These supervisors are often the only people who are aware that a certain employee is absent. They are in the best position to understand the circumstances surrounding an individual’s absence and to notice a problem at an early stage. Therefore, their active involvement in the company's absence procedures is pivotal to the overall effectiveness and future success of an absence policy or program.

Sadly, however, most supervisors have not received any guidance or training in managing absenteeism. They have been left on their own to carry out the often unpopular task of identifying, confronting and resolving absence abuse.

To ensure that supervisors are comfortable and competent in their role of managing absenteeism, they need to have the full support of senior management. All parties must be aware of the aim of absence policies and procedures. Should there be discrepancies between departments; a policy can lose its effectiveness.

To provide more consistency, supervisors should be trained in their responsibilities about managing absenteeism, advised how to conduct effective return-to-work interviews, and educated in the use of disciplinary procedures when necessary.

The Responsibilities of the Supervisor

In addition to ensuring that work is appropriately covered during the employee’s absence, there are a number of other critical actions that supervisors need to take to manage absenteeism. They should:

- ensure that all employees are fully aware of the organization’s policies and procedures for dealing with absence,
- be the first point of contact when an employee phones in sick,
- maintain appropriately detailed, accurate, and up-to-date absence records for their staff, (e.g., date, nature of illness/reason for absence, expected return to work date, doctor’s certification if necessary),
- identify any patterns or trends of absences which cause concern,
- conduct return-to-work interviews, and
- implement disciplinary procedures where necessary.

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The Return-to-Work Interview

The training of supervisors in how to best manage absenteeism should include instruction on how to conduct effective and fair return-to-work interviews. Recent national surveys indicate that these interviews are regarded as one of the most effective tools for managing short-term absenteeism.

The return-to-work discussion will enable the supervisor to welcome the employee back to work, in addition to demonstrating management’s strong commitment to controlling and managing absenteeism in the workplace. The interview will enable a check to be made that the employee is well enough to return to work.

The necessary paperwork can be completed, so that the absence and its conclusion are properly recorded. The fact that an established procedure is in place to investigate and discuss absence with an employee may, on its own, act as a deterrent for non-attendance for disingenuous reasons.

Interviews need to be carried out as promptly as possible following the absentee’s return to work (no later than one day after his or her return). The employee should be given ample opportunity to outline the reasons for his or her absence. The supervisor should use the interview as a time to explore any issues that the employee may have which are leading to absence.

The goal is to foster an open and supportive culture. The procedures are in place to make sure that help and advice is offered when needed and to ensure that the employee is fit to return to work. Employees will usually appreciate the opportunity to explain genuine reasons for absence within a formalized structure. Should the supervisor doubt the authenticity of the reasons given for absence, he/she should use this opportunity to express any doubts or concerns.

At all times, the employee must be aware that the interview is not merely part of company procedures, but a significant meeting during which the absence has been noted and may have implications for future employment. The company’s disciplinary procedure, in the event of unacceptable levels of absence, should be explained to the employee.

The manager may choose to outline how the absence affected the department. The message should be that the employee was missed and that productivity suffered. The manner in which the department was required to reorganize staffing arrangements might also be explained. This would demonstrate that the efficiency of the work unit was adversely affected by the absence.
The supervisor should then brief the returning employee about the current situation (i.e., what tasks are now priorities, what work has already been carried out and where the employee should now focus his/her efforts).

At no point during the meeting should the interview become a form of “punishment,” but should be seen as an occasion to highlight and explain the repercussions of absence within the department. The vast majority of employees derive a sense of pride and achievement from their work and management should be encouraged to treat these individuals as responsible adults.

Most employees understand reasonable rules and do not want to be threatened into compliance. The small percentage of employees who indeed have an absence problem will require close supervision and possibly even punitive measures for excessive absenteeism. These few employees who are irresponsible should be handled individually and firmly.

The following guidelines outline the recommended steps to be taken in cases where short-term absence is considered to be above an acceptable level in a particular period of time.

**Stage 1: Counseling Interview**

- The immediate supervisor should advise the employee of his concern over the absences, try to establish the reasons for the sickness and determine what needs to be done to improve attendance.
- If any medical condition is identified at this stage, and is likely to have an effect on job suitability, the supervisor should arrange an appointment with a company-approved doctor. This should be confirmed to the employee in writing within five working days.
- If, from the discussion, the problem does not appear to be due to an underlying unfitness for work, the supervisor should advise the employee that, while the recorded ailments may be genuine, a sustained improvement in attendance is expected or the next stage in the procedure will be taken.
- A review of the attendance will automatically be made each month for the next six months.

**Stage 2: First Formal Review (Verbal Warning Stage)**

- If the employee’s absences continue to worsen following analysis and regular monitoring, he should be invited to attend a formal review meeting with the supervisor.
- The absence record should be detailed in a letter inviting the employee for this interview. The employee should be advised that she is entitled to be represented by a union representative or a colleague as appropriate.
• The purpose of this meeting will be to:
  o continue to discuss the underlying reasons for the absences,
  o advise the employee of the service and cost implications of her absence,
  o and warn the employee (except when deciding to seek medical advice) that if there is not a substantial and sustained improvement, her employment may be terminated because of her inability to maintain an acceptable attendance level. This constitutes the verbal warning.

• Where medical attention is warranted, action must be taken immediately. The meeting is therefore only adjourned to allow this part of the process to be completed. Within five working days, the employee must receive medical advice. The meeting is then reconvened with HR and the doctor’s opinion is discussed.

• If the doctor confirms fitness for work, the employee should be warned about the consequences of continued absence.

Stage 3: Second Formal Review (Written Warning Stage)

• Where regular monitoring indicates that no improvement in the absence pattern has occurred, a second formal meeting will be arranged with HR.
• The letter inviting the employee to the meeting will include the absence record and, again, advice on representation.
• Any new information given at the meeting regarding ill health or a change in the nature of sickness may need to be assessed by a company-approved doctor.
• The employee should be given the opportunity to explain his or her absence record. If appropriate, the supervisor should inform the employee that a formal written warning is being issued and that this warning will remain in the employee’s file for a specified period. A copy of the warning should be issued to the employee and to his/her representative.
• The employee should be informed that failure to comply with the company’s attendance expectations, and to improve on the present unacceptable record of absence, will result in the termination of the employee’s employment.
• Where fitness for work is in doubt, proceed with redeployment options according to the guidance received by the doctor. Consult with the employee’s union representative (if applicable) on the redeployment process and options.

Stage 4: Temporary Suspension From Work

• If, following the implementation of the previous stages of the disciplinary process, no improvement in attendance occurs, management may proceed with a temporary suspension without pay. The intention to suspend should be confirmed in writing with details of start and end dates. A copy of the letter of suspension should be sent to the employee’s representative (if applicable).
Stage 5: Termination of Employment

- This is the final stage in the disciplinary process whereby the employee is dismissed for inability to comply with the company’s requirements for attendance at work. Dismissal can only take place with the written authorization of a senior manager and HR.
- The letter calling the employee in will, again, include advice on representation and will outline the absence record. The employee should be advised that, as a result of the interview, he or she may be dismissed for incapability to perform work duties.
- Again, the company doctor may have to be consulted if any new information is forthcoming in regard to the employee’s health or capacity for work.
- Where redeployment is not possible, or appropriate, consider proceeding with dismissal for reasons of capability. Eligibility for disability benefit will depend on the circumstances of each case.
- If a decision is made to dismiss on the basis of capability, a copy of the letter of dismissal should be sent to the employee’s representative (if appropriate).
- The employee may have the right to appeal against dismissal. The appeal should be in line with the company’s disciplinary procedures.

Challenges in Managing Absenteeism

Be aware that supervisors are often uncomfortable or unwilling to report on those who have exceeded acceptable levels of absenteeism. Because of the many pressures already on supervisors, the consistent implementation of absenteeism policies is not always their top priority.

It is important to try to take the subjectivity out of managing absenteeism and to ensure that all employees are treated the same. It is essential to be consistent, persistent, and fair to all. When absence is not addressed or addressed in an inconsistent manner, lower morale can result. Employees can feel they have been treated unfairly when they perceive other absent employees are “getting away with it.”

The majority of employees will appreciate policies and programs that are facilitative, rather than punitive. Stringent or punitive measures that force employees to come to work can result in employees that then become, "absent while at work."

They do as little as possible and resist any effort to get them to do more. Other programs should be implemented that help employees be present at work, such as flexible work scheduling, job sharing, attendance awards and wellness programs.