This Management Skills Learning Guide accompanies our video
Absenteeism: Getting a Grip in our WATCH & GO® video library.
Why it matters

Absenteeism is a problem for the person who is absent and for the organisation. The obvious cost of absence is the salary cost but there are many other costs. Absence places extra strain on the people who are present. If the absence is seen as being unjustified it can cause resentment amongst other staff and a loss of respect for a manager who is seen to be tolerating it. It can cause stress for the manager and for other members of the team. And it does direct damage in terms of lost output.

For the person who is absent it can contribute to depression and lack of self-esteem. In some cases, it can cause loss of income. It can lead to a sense of isolation. And, of course, there is the problem of dealing with poor health or other adverse circumstances that caused the absence in the first place.

Left alone, absence can fester and become a problem for everyone concerned. For this reason, it is essential that you, as a manager, know how to address it and deal with it.

Causes of absence

There are three main causes of absence:

Low motivation to come to work
Health problems
Adverse circumstances

The first one, low motivation to come to work, usually disguises itself as one of the other two. Very few people will tell you that they took the day off because they didn’t fancy coming to work. They are more likely to claim that they were unwell or that they had some problem in getting to work. There may well be a grain of truth in these claims. It is very easy to feel unwell if you hate the thought of going to work. It is also easy to be defeated by a minor transport problem that would not stop a determined person from getting through.

Low motivation to come to work is usually characterised by an above average number of short-term absences with a range of temporary causes.

Health problems can be physical or mental and tend to lead to longer-term absence but they can lead to regular short-term absences as well, usually with the same or similar causes.

Adverse circumstances are any difficulties that the individual faces that are not due to their own ill-health. These could be caring responsibilities, problems with transport, domestic emergencies or disability. Disability is an adverse circumstance and not a health problem unless the disabled person is also unwell. A person could be blind or missing a limb, for example, whilst being totally fit. One glance at the Paralympic athletes shows the absurdity of lumping disability in with health!

The Golden Rule

The golden rule in dealing with absence – whatever the cause – is to communicate about it. Never ignore an absence. Always talk to the person who is away. This means talking to them while they are away and talking to them when they get back.

You need to talk to the person because you need to find out why they are away and how you should deal with it. Most organisations have a policy that requires people to call in by a certain time on the first day of an absence. Yet a lot of people ignore this policy and either have a family member or friend call in on their behalf, or leave an early morning message on their manager’s voice mail.
Always insist on speaking with the person who is away. If they do not call in themselves, call them at the first opportunity to find out why they are away. Don’t allow your policy on calling in to be ignored.

This even applies if you have received a message telling you of something terrible such as bereavement. Call at once and tell the individual how sorry you are to hear the news and tell them not to worry about work. Let them know that you know and that you care and that you are willing to support them if you can. And then leave them to deal with the situation.

Obviously there will be occasions when you are not able to speak to the person who is away. They may be in hospital or asleep. But talking to a family member or friend who is looking after them will also serve to show them that you care.

You should continue to communicate with the person for as long as they are away. You won’t necessarily need to talk to them every day but you should talk to them regularly. This is particularly important in the case of long-term absence which can leave a person feeling isolated. Lack of communication from an employer can leave an individual thinking that nobody cares about whether they are at work or not and this can lead to depression and can even cause the absence to last longer than it otherwise would.

Speaking regularly to someone who is away is the most effective step you can take towards minimising the time that they are away. If they are ill you will be able to keep their morale up by showing that you are concerned for them and that they are being missed at work. You might also be able to encourage them to come back and do work of a less demanding or different nature to their normal work which gets them back into the habit of coming to work. And if they are suffering from an adverse circumstance you are more likely to be able to help them overcome it – for example, by discussing flexible working options.

But what if they are malingering – taking a “sickie”? Here, too, communicating with them while they are away is very effective. It will make them very aware that you are monitoring the situation and this is likely to make them uncomfortable and cause them to return to work at the first opportunity. However, you should be careful not to accuse them of anything over the phone. You should accept their explanation of why they are away, at least outwardly. The great thing about the method suggested in this programme – focusing on overall attendance rather than individual instances – is that you don’t have to get bogged down in discussing individual occurrences. With this method, it makes no difference whether you believe them or not or whether they are telling the truth or not.

The Return-to-Work Interview

Now we come to the single most powerful technique for handling absence: the Return-to-Work Interview. Do this with every person every time. If you treat everyone the same way you will be sure to avoid any charge of discrimination or unfairness.

Always hold the Return-to-Work Interview in private in surroundings that are as comfortable and non-threatening as you can manage and always hold it within an hour or so of the return to work. But don’t hold it the second they walk through the door. Allow time for them to settle back in.

A simple and effective structure to follow is the “Warm Welcome”. WARM is a mnemonic that stands for:

Welcome Absence Record Move On
Welcome them back

Welcome them back, tell them they were missed and check that they are in a fit state to be back at work. If they have been ill, ask how they are now and make sure that they are well enough to be at work. If they have been dealing with a family problem, ask if they are in a frame of mind to work. If they have been experiencing adverse circumstances, ask if the problem is now resolved.

Discuss the Absence

This is a two-way affair. You need to ask about the reasons for the absence – in fact the other person will probably want to tell you – and you also need to discuss the effect the absence had at work. Listen to what the person says about their absence and ask questions, if necessary, to clarify your understanding. Don’t directly challenge their version of events or make suspicious or sarcastic comments. Once you have clearly understood their account of the absence, make any notes that you need to make for your records and move on to discuss the effect the absence has had at work.

This is important. Nobody likes to hear that nobody noticed the fact that they were away! Tell them objectively and unemotionally what happened while they were away. Avoid saying things like, “we had a terrible time! Thank goodness you are back” but let them know what effect their absence had on both the work and on their colleagues. Your purpose here is not to criticise or to make the person feel uncomfortable. It is to reassure them that they are important to the team and that their presence was missed. And it is to inform them of what took place while they were away.

Record

This is the noun, not the verb – rec-ord not re-cord. Tell them how their attendance record looks now. This brings us to a key point. If you are going to control absence you must have a clear idea as to what level of absence you regard as acceptable. You need a target or a benchmark against which to judge whether someone’s attendance is acceptable. This might be the average number of days lost per employee per year or it might be a measure such as the Bradford Index. Whatever it is, you must publish it. People need to know what levels of absence are regarded as normal.

There is an argument that you should not publish this information because people will simply take that number of days off each year. This is wrong. Firstly, it takes an uncharitable view of human nature that is not born out in practice but also it ignores the effect of regular return to work interviews and communication. People will be unlikely to take days off without a good reason if they know that you will be calling them while they are away and talking to them when they get back. In any event the small risk of abuse is more than compensated for by the fact that people will have a clear idea of what level of absence is likely to trigger further action.

So tell them how their record looks and how it compares to the benchmark. Again, don’t criticise or seek to make them feel uncomfortable. Just tell them truthfully and directly how their record now compares with the benchmark. Say something like, “as you know, we are aiming to achieve an average absence of less than five days per person per year. This absence brings your rolling total to seven days in the past year. So you are running just a little above the target.”

If their record is worse than the benchmark, they may ask you if this is a problem. If they are very close to the benchmark, say something like, “No. There are bound to be times when absence goes above the target. We might need to talk about it if it stays above target but assuming it drops back then I don’t think there is anything to worry about.”

You need to use your judgement here. If someone has just missed six weeks due to major surgery
and your target is five days per year then there is no point in telling them that they are way over the target – you will simply make them anxious and achieve nothing. But you can still talk about their record by saying, for example, that you are not going to count this one-off major event towards their absence target and that you are confident that they will return to their previous high level of attendance once they are fully recovered.

But what if their record is now much worse than your target and you are worried about it? In that case you tell them that their record is now causing you concern and that you would like to have a separate Absence Review Meeting to discuss it and that you will be in touch shortly with a time and place for that meeting. For now, though, you would like to discuss the steps necessary to get them working effectively again.

**Move on**

The final stage of the Return-to-Work interview is Move On – get them back to work. The object of this phase is to leave the subject of the absence and move on to what needs doing next. Use this phase to discuss the priorities and steps necessary to get everything back to normal as quickly as possible.

**The Absence Review Meeting**

If you do what we have suggested so far: communicate with people who are away and hold return to work interviews, a large part of your absence problems will disappear. Why? In the case of genuine reasons for absence you will be on top of the causes and in a position to discuss ways in which they can be overcome or accommodated. And in the case of not-so-genuine causes, the interest that you are taking in the absences will cause the individual concerned to think carefully before taking more time off.

But what about those cases where this doesn’t work? Those cases where someone’s attendance record is causing you concern? The answer is the Absence Review Meeting. This is a separate meeting to review the individual’s overall attendance record.

**When to hold the absence review meeting**

Hold an absence review meeting whenever a person’s attendance record falls below the target or benchmark that you have set and you don’t know why this is, or you are not satisfied with the explanation.

Always hold it a day or so after the last return to work interview. If you hold it as part of the return to work interview there is a good chance that the individual will be focused on the immediate past absence.

**The meeting itself**

The Absence Review Meeting is not about any individual absence. It is about the overall level of attendance. This is an absolutely crucial point. Your problem is not that the individual has just been away – all of us have to be away sometimes. Your problem is that this individual has a higher level of absence than other people and you don’t know why.

Make clear at the outset of the meeting that the individual has an attendance record that is worse than the benchmark and that your purpose is to find out why this is and whether there is anything that should be done about it. State that you are not going to discuss individual absences because you
have already done that at the return to work interviews. What you want to ask is: does the individual know of any reason why his or her attendance is worse than other people’s.

Be very careful not to say or imply that you do not believe the reasons for absence are genuine unless you have evidence to support this. Being away dishonestly is a disciplinary matter and if you do have evidence – such as television footage of the person at a Six Nations match when they were claiming sick pay – then you should move straight to a disciplinary hearing. But assuming that you don’t have any evidence, the purpose of the Absence Review Meeting is to begin the process of investigation into a higher than normal level of absence.

As in any investigation carried out at work, you should remain neutral and open-minded. Simply ask the question: do you know of any reason why your attendance record should be less good than the benchmark? And listen to their answer. And ask questions to clarify what they say. Keep talking and listening until you have a clear picture of any reason for the extra absence.

**What to do about it**

What you do next depends on the answers you get. These will either be clear and convincing or vague and unconvincing. In rare cases they will be clear and unconvincing! A convincing explanation might be: Following my treatment for cancer my immune system is depressed and I am more susceptible to coughs and colds. Arguably you should have known this sooner but you know it now and it is clearly both genuine and valid. You can then go on to discuss the outlook and what you are both going to do about it. In this particular example, you could ask how long the suppression of the immune system is likely to last and whether some alternative working arrangement might be appropriate while it lasts.

By the way, you don’t have to accept high levels of absence just because they are for genuine reasons. The law does allow dismissal on grounds of incapacity – the person is unable to do the job. Nobody likes to do this but if the work of the organisation is suffering and there is no immediate likelihood of the individual being able to return to normal levels of attendance then you may have to consider either moving the individual to other, less demanding or less important work, or of beginning the process of dismissing them. There are legal safeguards and processes that are in place to protect individuals from unfair treatment and you must be careful to follow these fully but sometimes your only option is to go down this route.

Another example of a convincing explanation could be: My childminder keeps letting me down and I have to stay at home with my children when she cancels at short notice. Now that you know the reason you can discuss ways of dealing with it. Again, you don’t have to accept the situation. You could, quite properly, take the line that this is not the organisation’s problem and that whilst you sympathise you do expect the individual to solve his or her problem and attain a normal level of attendance. If these levels are not achieved then you will have to begin formal proceedings that could lead to dismissal. However, you may wish to follow a more supportive route and discuss ways in which the organisation might be able to help. Provision of an organisational crèche would be a superb outcome but assuming that you don’t have the power to do this you could agree on different hours or on an arrangement whereby the individual is able to take time off when the problem arises but agrees to make up the lost time on other occasions. It is very important that you don’t end up with all the concessions on your side. If you are going to get a grip on absence and not subject yourself to undue stress then you need to make sure that the other person agrees that this is their problem and they have to make a contribution to solving it.
The unconvincing explanation

What if the individual is vague: I just get more coughs and colds than anyone else? You don’t have to accept this. You have a right to expect the individual to be at work as often as anyone else and you are entitled to know the reason if this is not the case. There are two ways you can go if you cannot get a more convincing explanation at this point. You can move straight to an investigation of the facts or you can set a target for the individual to achieve, failing which you will move to an investigation.

It is usually better to begin with a target. Say something like: If you are not aware of any underlying reason for your attendance to be below the benchmark then I will expect your attendance in future to come up to the benchmark. If it does not then I will have to seek a medical investigation.

Very often the person’s attendance will, mysteriously, come up to satisfactory levels after such a conversation. If it does not then you will have to investigate further. Bear in mind that such an investigation may discover a genuine reason for the high levels of absence.

The Investigation

If you decide to investigate you will need to follow any policies that your organisation lays down for this purpose. You will certainly need to work with your HR department and, possibly, your Occupational Health department, if you have one. If your organisation has neither department then make certain that you involve senior management in the process.

There are two ways to investigate high levels of absence that have no obvious cause but which seem related to health. You can seek a report from the individual’s GP or you can refer the individual to a doctor who is working for your organisation. In either event you must obtain the permission of the individual and he or she does not have to give this. Assuming that they do give permission you must obtain this in writing and pass this written permission to the doctor whose advice you are seeking. Under current legislation the individual has the right to see any report and to make representations to the examining doctor about any aspect of it with which the individual disagrees.

If the individual refuses permission for a medical report then you can insist that he or she attains the benchmark level of attendance or face formal proceedings.

Conclusion

In most cases an investigation will not be necessary. The individual will either have a valid reason to be away more often than normal or they will not. When they don’t then they will, in most cases, respond to a warning that they must either reach normal levels of attendance of face further investigation or formal proceedings.

The key principles to help you get a grip on absence are:

• Communicate
• Hold Return-to-Work Interviews
• Discuss overall levels of attendance rather than individual cases once a problem becomes apparent.
This Learning Guide relates to the video programme
Absenteeism: Getting a Grip.
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