

Member's Quarterly

Winter 2019 Edition

Feature

Managing the Patterned Absent Employee

Success with that difficult conversation

Managing the employee you suspect deals with some of life's challenges through regular and predictable absence from work can be frustrating, expensive and tiring. There's an impact on colleagues, clients, your team's productivity and profitability and to insurance agencies like WCB and LTD providers.

Patterned absence is usually defined considering: unscheduled absences the day before or after a scheduled holiday, vacation or personal day; on a specific day of the week, weekend, or a specific or unique work day; on desirable days off when the employee might otherwise be scheduled to work such a religious holiday; or as sick leave or other paid time off is accrued.

One must determine if the absence is innocent or blameworthy. Innocent means non-blameworthy and for reasons usually beyond the employee's control. Blameworthy or culpable includes absences within the employee's control for which discipline might be required. And while termination might be the result of either, the pathway to termination is different depending on the circumstances.

The goal is successful, regular and predictable attendance at work. Employers can expect employees to come to work, must accommodate as required under the *Human Rights Act* and have the right to be informed of the basis for an inability to work including the limitations or accommodations required. Employees in turn are expected to fulfill their duties under employment contracts, mitigate absence, provide information about the absence, expected return to work dates and requirements. Employees must also fully cooperate with the employer's efforts to reasonably accommodate.

So how DO you manage absence? What can you say? How do you address it? What if you are accused of bullying? What will the union say? What happens if you are wrong?

Start with a conversation. Avoiding the hard conversation at the beginning makes for a harder conversation later on. It needs to be a head and heart conversation about all elements of the situation. Why head and heart? Because people cannot truly hear us until there is a connection and feeling of trust. Your work is in establishing trust and dealing with facts.

Choose how you show up. Before speaking with the employee, examine your attitude and beliefs about this person or the situation. How might your feelings influence your approach? Which of your values are affected by this employee's behaviour? What's your perspective? What emotion do you have around it? What are your assumptions? Unless you can hold an open mind and be prepared to listen and work with the employee, the conversation is at risk of failure.

Host the conversation considering both **what** you have to say and **how** you say it. Use your presence and skill to be honest, open, transparent and authentic. Be curious. Ask open-ended questions and explore what's going on for this employee. If the employee does not answer quickly, use silence rather than rush to rescue as the employee is thinking about the response.

Share the data and facts you have as that-data and fact — rather than assumption and accusation. Tell the employee about the patterns you see and provide examples. Alternatively you could share the data and ask them what they see. Review the strategies tried so far and be curious about why something has or has not worked. Be prepared to name your suspicions. Ask what might be going on for this person.



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Name the impact of the absence on you, colleagues, clients and the organization. Take care in how you do this. Aim to speak candidly without blame or accusation. Create the tone where the employee can see that you care about his or her wellbeing, not just about the work or bottom line.

Reinforce the desired outcome. If this employee is to continue working with the organization, they need to feel like they can come to work in a psychologically safe and supportive environment. The employer needs to be able to count on the employee to do what he or she was hired to do. Ideally the goal is a mutually satisfying and productive working relationship.

Structure the conversation. It helps if you can structure the conversation to flow through five phases. These are: Introduction, Intentions and Data, Acknowledgement and Exploration, Expectations of Action and Summary.

During the introduction, you could start with "Thank you for meeting with me. I'd like to talk about your absence from work." Then share your intentions and the data. Statements could include: "I want to be clear about my intention to work with you on finding a way to help you be at work on a more regular basis." When sharing the facts, one could say "I want to draw your attention to what I've noticed regarding your time away from work." You can also say "The record shows X days missed over X period." It's important to state that you "value the employee's contribution and want him/her to be there."

Statements and questions to help you explore could include: "I'm curious about the factors contributing to the absence pattern and what we might be able to do to help." "What resources can you access that help you address the issues contributing to the absence?" It's important to stay curious and ask open-ended questions to get at the root of what is really going on for the employee.

The last phases provide an opportunity to be exceptionally clear about the go forward. State your expectation of regular attendance. Work with the employee to generate options and a plan. Ask, "What steps can you take to ensure a more regular attendance?" "What support do you need from us to help you be successful?" Finally, have the employee state their view of the conversation, expectations and the plan. You might say, "I just want to make sure we are on the same page so I'd like to hear your view of what we've talked about." End by thanking the employee and offering to assist as necessary.

Managing patterned absence is not easy. When a manager addresses it early and with good intent, the goal of continued and successful regular employment can be achieved. Everyone wins.

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