

Managing Employee Absenteeism

Absenteeism in the workplace is a problem all managers encounter, and although absences are often due to legitimate reasons, they can also very easily get out of control if they're not managed carefully. Persistent unexcused absenteeism, particularly when it involves just a few individuals, not only lowers productivity and increases everyone else's workload, but it can precipitate a negative atmosphere in the workplace. Swift attention is necessary.



KNOW THE PROBLEMS

Absenteeism and tardy employees can have a detrimental effect on your department and the whole organization in multiple ways:

- ▲ Resentment may grow among coworkers who are asked to step in to pick up the slack for an absent employee. As a result, morale plummets as our workers begin to wonder why they show up and work hard when others don't have to.
- ▲ Overtime is often needed to make up for work the absent employees should have been doing.
- ▲ Customer service will likely be hurt when phones go unanswered or there aren't enough people on hand to adequately meet customer needs.
- ▲ Employees with good attendance records may start coming in late or take days off in reaction to excessive absenteeism and lateness on the part of their coworkers. The snowball effect of such a situation can have a serious negative impact on the production and work product of your department.

Absences occur for many reasons – burnout, stress, low morale, job hunting, etc. – and need to be addressed quickly. The following tips may help:

1. Is the Absence for Genuine Reasons?

Ever wondered if there was a good reason behind that call you got from an absent employee excusing himself from work for the day? Often there is a genuine reason and your gut instinct can guide you on this one. However, if you are noticing an excessive pattern and finding it hard to take your employee's word for it, then it's time to take action. If an employee is simply not bothering to show up or give you advance notice, then an intervention is essential. Start actively documenting tardiness and absences.

2. Give Employees an Opportunity to Explain Themselves

The first thing you can do is give employees an opportunity to explain themselves. When they return to work, have a one-on-one discussion about their absence and express your concern. This is not a disciplinary

discussion, but more of a fact-finding mission. Your goal is to understand what's happening and try to solve the issue. For example, if stress is a factor, then you may need to discuss strategies that can help, such as shifting workloads, reducing responsibilities, etc.

Very often, employees are pleased that they have been given an opportunity to air their problems or grievances. But be warned, you may learn things that you don't want to hear, particularly if it turns out that your management style is the problem. Try to remain objective during the discussion and use it as a platform to change things.

3. Put a Performance Improvement Plan in Place

If the tactic above doesn't work, then you need to put a performance review plan in place that sets specific goals for improvement, attendance being one of them. Put the plan in writing and clearly explain the timeframe of the plan and the consequences of not fulfilling its requirements.

4. Develop and Communicate a Clear Leave / Sick Leave Policy

A written policy won't stop absenteeism, but it will help you deal with it more effectively. It will also demonstrate to all employees that you don't tolerate absenteeism. Use the document to clearly explain paid and unpaid leave policies and the consequences of unexcused absences. If you have a company newsletter or intranet, use these to promote your policy.

Note that the law doesn't require you to provide general leave benefits, but it does require employers to provide leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), various sick leave ordinances and other state laws – keep an eye on local laws before taking any tangible employment actions.

See below for a sample reporting for work/absenteeism policy.

5. Assess your Management Style

It's hard to acknowledge, but one of the more common reasons for employee dissatisfaction is management style. Could your style be encouraging employees to harbor grudges or lose morale? Step back and assess what you can do differently. Is your open door policy really that open? Do employees really feel valued? Plan on setting aside more management time for your team, discuss their professional goals, and share your vision for the continued growth of your business and their role in it.

6. Consider Introducing Incentive Plans

While there are no guarantees that you can control absenteeism, initiatives such as incentive plans and programs such as flex-time, wellness programs, and project completion perks, are proven to increase morale and productivity. They also send a clear message to your employees that they have a recognized and valuable role to play in your business as a whole.

7. Terminating Repeat Offenders

If you've exhausted all these intervention measures and aren't seeing improvement, then termination may be your only option. Follow your HR policy to the letter on this one and refer to the law as it pertains to terminating employees, final pay checks, and more.

SAMPLE POLICY LANGUAGE

Reporting for Work

Please report for work in sufficient time to be ready to start work promptly at the beginning of the shift. You are expected to stay at your workstation during the working hours of your shift except in case of emergency. If it becomes necessary for you to leave work early, you must notify your supervisor or the main office prior to leaving.

Absence from Work

If you find it necessary to be absent from work because of illness or similar cause, it is your responsibility to notify your supervisor as far in advance of your start time as is possible. If you are unable to report to work, you must notify your supervisor or the main office prior to the start of your shift in order for the absence to be excused.

It is your responsibility to provide sufficient, reasonable evidence to support a determination of an excused absence. A doctor's certificate may be required before returning to work from absences due to injury or illness. Excessive absenteeism will subject you to disciplinary action up to and including discharge. This rule will be strictly enforced.

Failure to Report

If you fail to report for work for three (3) consecutive shifts without personal notification, and approval by your immediate supervisor or a member of management, The Company will consider that you have abandoned your position and voluntarily terminated your employment.

Excused Absence or Tardy

An absence is defined here as the failure to report to your designated work shift at any point of your scheduled shift. Tardiness is defined here as reporting to work but not being at your workstation when the shift begins, ready to work, either at the beginning of the day or returning from a break or lunch period. Leaving work early will be treated as an absence. Employees leaving work without permission from your supervisor will result in disciplinary action up to and including discharge. The following absences will be excused and will not count against the six (6) Excused Absences in a six (6) month period policy: military leave, jury duty, funeral leave, approved leave, family medical leave, personal day, family emergency, vacations and holidays or industrial accidents.

All Excused Absences require prior to shift notification.

Absences/Tardies that may be considered Excused are: Sickness/Injury of employee or family member, vehicle problems, road construction, weather and natural disaster. With proper notification according to this policy, other absences may be considered excused. Without proper notification, any other absences, for any reason, will be considered unexcused.

Unexcused Absences and Tardies

Only those absences for which you have properly notified your supervisor office according to this policy will be classified as excused. All other absences will be unexcused, except in extreme emergencies.

In any six (6) month period, The Company, considers three (3) unexcused absences to be excessive and will take appropriate corrective action as stated below:

- ▲ The second absence and/or tardiness will result in written notification by your supervisor.
- ▲ The third absence and/or tardiness will result in a final written warning and a discussion with your supervisor.
- ▲ The fourth absence and/or tardiness will result in disciplinary action up to and including discharge.

The Company reserves the right when unusual circumstances surround any employee's excused or unexcused absences, regardless of whether notification was given, to have the Supervisor and the Personnel Manager review the extenuating circumstances and if warranted to take a more or less aggressive disciplinary action.