

Absenteeism — Causes and Cures

by Gene Levine

QUESTION: "We have tried several times to reduce our excessive absenteeism from 12 percent to 6 percent without success. What suggestions can you offer to get us where we want to be?"

ANSWER: My first suggestion is that your absenteeism goal should be 3 percent instead of 6 percent per annum. Although it probably will require some serious commitments on your part, it certainly is an achievable goal.

But before we begin any analysis, a definition of "absence" must be established. For the purpose of this column, an absence refers to time an employee is not on the job during scheduled working hours, except for a granted leave of absence, holiday or vacation time. Using the standard U.S. Department of Labor formula, the rate of absenteeism is calculated by dividing the number of working days lost through absence in any given period by the total number of available working days in that same period, as follows:

Absenteeism Rate = Number of lost working days due to absence / (Number of employees) x (Number of Workdays) x 100

For Example:

a. Average number of employees in work force	100
b. Number of available workdays during period	20
c. Total number of available workdays (a x b)	2,000
d. Total number of lost days due to absences during the period	93
e. Absenteeism percent (d [divided by] c) x 100	4.65%

I like to think of absenteeism as a disease that appears whenever a company fails to inoculate itself through the use of sound management practices. To cure excessive absenteeism, one has to know the exact causes and then examine the available, workable and proven solutions to apply against those causes. [*]

Establishing the Basic Facts

To embark upon a successful absenteeism reduction program, you need to make sure you have some basic information and facts about absenteeism in your company. Consider the following questions, and as you begin to dig for the answers, you likely will become aware of many ways to address your problems.

Getting to the Root of the Problem

Once you have completed the above checklists, your responses should give you food for thought and direction for combating absenteeism. If you have not made it a policy to keep track of the items above, your first step now should be clearly mapped out for you. As a next step, consider the following four questions, which should help you further focus your ideas and put a plan into action.

1 Why is your present absenteeism policy ineffective?

Absenteeism policies vary in effectiveness. Most ineffective policies I have reviewed have a common denominator: They allow "excused" absences, whereas those that do work are "no fault" policies.

2. Where and when is excessive absenteeism occurring?

Numerous studies have concluded that under trained supervisors are one of the main causes of absenteeism. Therefore, any company experiencing absenteeism of greater than 3 percent should consider supervisors as a potential contributor to the problem.

Given that this may be the case, you first should check the percentage of employee absenteeism by supervisor to see if it is concentrated around one or two supervisors. If it is, you've begun to uncover the obvious--undertrained supervisors. If, however, your research reveals that the rate of absenteeism is almost equally distributed throughout your factory, you will need to investigate other possible causes.

3. A What are the real causes for absences?

People-oriented companies are very sensitive to employee opinions. They often engage in formal mini-studies to solicit anonymous employee opinions on topics of mutual interest. These confidential worker surveys commonly ask for employee opinion regarding higher-than-normal absenteeism. The responses have revealed rather surprising results: low pay, poor benefits and high workloads were not major causes, nor was actual

sickness. Instead, absenteeism generally was found to be a symptom of low job satisfaction, sub-standard working conditions and consistent negative and unfair treatment received by first-line supervisors.

In other words, employees revealed that repetitive, boring jobs coupled with uncaring supervisors and/or physically unpleasant workplaces led them to make up excuses for not coming to work, such as claiming to be sick. If your employees perceive that your company is indifferent to their needs, they are less likely to be motivated, or even to clock in at all.

One way to determine the causes of absenteeism is to question your supervisors about their employees' excessive absenteeism, including what causes it and how to reduce it. Of course, if your supervisors have made no efforts to get to know the employees in their respective departments, they may not be able to provide reasons. However, just the act of questioning may get the ball rolling and signal to your supervisors that their involvement is important.

4. How much formal training have your supervisors received on absenteeism containment and reduction?

If you find that your supervisors hesitate to provide meaningful answers to your questions, then you're on the right track toward a solution. Ask yourself, "How much formal training have I given my supervisors in the areas of absenteeism reduction and human resources skills?" If your answer is none or very little, your solution can't be far behind. The fact of the matter is, you cannot ask a person to do a job he or she has never been trained to do.

If you have an absenteeism problem, it should now be clear that the place to begin the cure is with its main causes: under-trained supervision and unsatisfactory working conditions. Without improvement in these areas, you can expect your high rate of absenteeism to continue.

Until next time, remember that a window of opportunity won't open itself.

Gene Levine has authored almost 70 papers and 12 management supervisory training manuals. Since 1965 his consultancy, well-known seminars and pertinent literature have assisted sewn products organizations in realizing their motivation, production, training, engineering, communication and incentive system opportunities. Contact Levine with your questions for "The Industry Advisor" at tel.: 56 1-6378 139, by e-mail at gl@genelevine.com, via his Web site at <http://www.genelevine.com>, or fax or e-mail them to Lisa Rabon, editor in chief, at fax: 803-799-1461, e-mail: Ira_bon@mfi.com.

(*) Editor's Note: For a more comprehensive overview of absenteeism, including the manual, Reducing and Controlling Absenteeism and Labor Turnover visit Gene Levine Associates' Web site at www.genelevine.com.

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