

Developing Better Attendance

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Maintaining good attendance is the responsibility of every employee, regardless of one's position in an organization. Without individuals who appear at their work stations at scheduled intervals, organizations will be less able to fulfill their missions. Other employees -- often interdependent with the absent employee -- will be stalled in completing their individual tasks. In general, it will take more filled lines to complete the same level of work as otherwise would be necessary. Good attendance is truly one way to affect agencies' productivity.

Nonetheless organizations recognize that there are legitimate reasons for employees to be absent: disabling illnesses and injuries, personal business, vacation, citizenship responsibilities such as jury duty and military leave, to name some of the most common reasons. Personnel policies generally contain provisions granting time off for these purposes, in many cases with pay.

Therefore, absence in itself is not the issue. However, within the benefits and the rules which govern their use there are many choices organizations, managers, supervisors and employees can make that will affect attendance.

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The objective of this document is to help managers understand a series of issues which must be considered when seeking to develop the best attendance possible. The material will:

1. Discuss the need to measure attendance, including problems of measurement;
2. Identify and analyze a behavioral model which describes those variables which influence levels of attendance; and,
3. Suggest alternative ways in which organizations can use the concepts from that model to create individualized projects resulting in improved attendance patterns.

We should emphasize one point: this is not a program which has as its objective the identification and elimination of time and attendance abusers. Our objective is to provide an understanding of how one might create an organizational culture which encourages good attendance.

Finally, individuals with management responsibility should understand the development and implementation of programs promoting that objective cannot happen without a coordinated and sustained effort from every person who might influence the outcome.

This includes the enthusiastic personal commitment of executive staff who must help initiate such an undertaking and never thereafter give up participation in and oversight of that undertaking. That enthusiasm must permeate the entire organization. In essence, even in tackling so controversial a job as changing policies, attitudes and practices about attendance and leave, there is potential to establish a team

building activity which in the long run might draw different parts of the organization together with renewed commitment to excellence in individual behavior and service.

Measuring Attendance

In order to develop appropriate interventions within an organization which will help employees develop good attendance, the organization must compile reliable data about attendance. In this respect, the data collection process should be sufficiently clear that rank-and-file employees, supervisors and other managers will routinely report and record correct information in a consistent fashion.

At the heart of such a process is a clear understanding of the present attendance rules. Individuals using leave and those monitoring leave will make errors where they are not familiar with the nature of the rules.

Once collected for individual employees, the data should then have the following potential:

1. It should be retained in a database that will provide answers to the following issues:
 - A. Total leave used;
 - B. Date of each absence;
 - C. Duration of each absence;
 - D. Reason for each absence;

- E. Frequency of unscheduled absence;
- F. Frequency of unapproved absence; and,
- G. Relationship of the absence to pass days, holidays, overtime assignment, etc.

Having collected such information, the database should be useful in helping the organization understand the variations in attendance behaviors. Does attendance vary by:

Shift?

Geographic location?

Work location?

Job title?

Program?

Supervisor?

Other?

The data base should be able to provide answers to these questions for each employee and/or unit of the organization at various intervals of time: for example, during the last three months, six months, one year, etc.

We would stress that the raw data for an individual cannot by itself determine that someone misuses attendance. Certainly the data, if reliable, will provide information with which additional inquiries can be made; however, even someone with a large number

of unscheduled absences and relatively low accrual balance might have a justifiable explanation for the behavior. Or someone who had a single long-term illness might also have low leave balances. In a management system that works efficiently, the employee's supervisor should already have begun discussions with the employee about the absences and therefore know their causes.

Problems in Measurement

We often say in management that the "bottom line" is performance. To the extent that we are concerned with attendance at work, the measurement of the bottom line is somewhat simplified. (Measuring other types of outcomes -- e.g. patient care in a psychiatric center or the quality of teaching at a university -- is much more complex.) Attendance consists of a series of concrete behaviors which permit reliable creation of documentary records from which we can reach valid conclusions. For example, an organization's staff can ordinarily determine:

- Whether someone arrived at work;
- The time the person arrived in relation to the beginning of his or her scheduled work day; and,
- The time the person left work.

These measurements can be systematically recorded, becoming a part of comprehensive database from which performance measures are calculated. From only these observations an organization could determine the number of days persons were actually at the work place, the frequency with which persons arrived on time and the length of each

tardiness. Any one of these measures might be important depending on the nature of work the employees perform.

Additional detail in the record keeping system will be important depending on what questions an organization wishes to answer. Suppose that the number of days persons are actually at work in a particular location is below a predetermined acceptable level. Review of the reasons for absence might identify the area where improvement can occur. Management is generally in a position to collect information about those reasons since supervisors have discretion to approve or deny certain types of leave depending on operating needs. They also record other absences as reported by employees for illness or injury that prevent the employees from working.

There are great possibilities, but also there are a number of critical issues which organizations must confront in creating a database which can become the basis of a credible information system.

1. The sources of much data come from records in control of employees' immediate supervisors. This supposes that the supervisors are diligently and systematically keeping records.
 - A. In some cases supervisors do not accept time keeping of this sort as an important part of their job. Therefore these individuals are not likely to keep records which accurately reflect what really happened.

- B. In other cases supervisors and employees might negotiate an attendance record which is different than the actual reasons for which someone is absent. For example, in many shift operations it is difficult for supervisors to approve time off due to operational needs in the department. Supervisors in some cases will tell employees to call in sick rather than request leave, since the supervisor cannot deny leave due to illness. As a consequence of the negotiations, the database will not show the real reason for the absence and therefore create a misleading data entry.
 - C. Supervisors of field employees are in many instances unable to easily determine the actual arrival and departure times of individuals, making it difficult to know whether employees performed scheduled duties.
 - D. Professional employees are generally exempt from keeping detailed attendance records where they are not overtime eligible.
2. Even where records are diligently and systematically collected the information must be entered into a database which management can retrieve in order to make informed decisions on a timely basis. Generally the size of most organizations require the use of computers to organize the data. Appropriate hardware, software and sufficient staff to enter and retrieve data are all considerations in developing this system.

3. How will the system categorize the data? Will it provide an organization-wide average? Facility averages? Unit averages? Sub-unit averages? Will data be broken down by geographic location? Job title? Function? We would point out that statistical averages of attendance are generally less valid indicators of performance the smaller the unit of employees being evaluated.
4. To whom will the system provide this information? Only upper management? Supervisors? Other persons or agencies? For what purposes will the information be used?
5. What does the data mean? If, for example, the data show an unscheduled absenteeism rate of 2.5%, is that good? In this respect, to what extent is the data a fair measure of performance? To what extent does the size of the unit make a difference? Or location? Or the job function? Should there be different thresholds of concern depending on these factors?

Factors Affecting Good Attendance

In order to develop useful initiatives to improve attendance, it is important to understand the variables affecting the attendance behavior within an organization. One can use these variables to analyze a single employee's behavior or the behavior of groups of employees, including the behavior of all employees.

1. Effort

All employees make decisions. either consciously or unconsciously, about the amount of energy they will expend in performing a task.

- A. To a large extent those decisions are a function of their individual values.
- B. In other cases they are a function of the types of rewards or incentives an organization offers to employees and the degree to which those employees believe that rewards are provided as a function of the effort they expend.
- C. Rewards may either be positive or negative. If positive, rewards must be ones to which individuals are sufficiently attracted that they would change their habits or values in order to receive them. If negative, rewards must be ones which are sufficiently unattractive to individuals that they would likewise change their habits or values to avoid them.

2. Job Satisfaction

There is a significant relationship between job satisfaction and good attendance. Individuals who experience high job satisfaction tend to have better attendance records than those with lower job satisfaction.

- A. An important factor affecting an employee's job satisfaction is his or her belief that he or she is fairly treated. Therefore, consistency in providing both positive and negative rewards is essential.
- B. The relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism is so strong that widespread absenteeism, sometimes coupled with high turnover, is often the first evidence management observes concerning morale problems.

3. Role Perception

An employee's role perception is what he or she believes is expected behavior at work. Individuals who do not have a clear idea of what is expected or who have a misinformed idea of what is expected will generally not be viewed as performing their jobs adequately.

- A. In some cases of attendance, individuals sometimes believe that it is appropriate to use sick leave as a vacation day now and then.
- B. Or sometimes the actual practice with respect to tolerating lateness creates confusion about what the real rule is regardless of the fact that there may be a written expectation about arrival and departure times.
- C. In other cases a failure of managers and supervisors at many levels to adequately monitor attendance will suggest to employees that being at work

is not valued within the organization, therefore undermining what otherwise might have been a clearly expressed expectation valuing good attendance.

4. Ability

In some cases individuals lack the capacity to exhibit excellent attendance patterns for reasons relating to their ability. Common examples of circumstances that might affect one's ability to maintain good attendance are:

- Chronic illness;
- Family sick leave problems;
- Child or elder care responsibilities;
- Lack of dependable transportation;
- Drug and alcohol abuse.

How Can Organizations Affect Attendance?

Given the number of variables affecting attendance, there are many ways in which organizations can help improve overall performance with respect to this issue.

1. Effort

- A. In some cases agencies might develop better criteria for the selection of employees, at least within the discretion the civil service and human rights laws permit. The goal would be to select a larger proportion of persons already committed to good attendance practices.

- B. A similar consideration could exist in better utilization of the employee's probationary period. In many cases individual exhibit poor attendance during this "on the job" portion of the selection process. Management should determine at this point whether correction of the attendance problem is a possibility given the fact that it is taking place even during a period of limited job security.

- C. Management could develop intensive educational materials and training programs which seek to change already existing values which affect how hard employees will try to be at work.

- D. In still other cases management might develop rewards—positive or negative -- which are contingent on employees' expending effort to achieve better performance. In the case of negative rewards, most often disciplinary action, they should only be imposed where it is clear that all other methods of improvement have failed. Put differently, it must be clear that an employee's failure to perform adequately is the result of lack of effort, not some other correctable problem.

- E. The use of positive rewards to improve effort is quite complex and not as easy to implement as an incentive program relating to improving job satisfaction described below. The best systems of this sort have two conditions in common. First, they provide rewards which are highly valued

by staff; and, they are careful to isolate the performance which increasing effort is likely to improve so that the reward will truly be contingent upon the better performance resulting from increased effort.

2. Job Satisfaction

Since individuals who receive rewards are ordinarily more satisfied with their circumstances at work, organizations might implement incentive programs which provide specific rewards for those maintaining identified levels of attendance.

Examples of

what some organizations currently provide are:

- A yearly luncheon and awards ceremony recognizing superior attendance;
- Small cash payments;
- Chances in a lottery drawing for a vacation.

3. Role Perception

A. In some cases employees' role perceptions are a product of misinformation about the attendance rules themselves. Often employees learn about the rules from the organizational culture with which they interact at work.

Therefore, a training program for all employees about what the rules provide -- both in terms of monitoring attendance and the appropriate uses of each leave category -- might be an important alternative.

- B. Programs like the foregoing ought not be limited to rank-and-file employees. Individuals in upper management, including commissioners, and supervision should attend.

- C. The manner in which absences are reported might be changed to include notification of one's immediate supervisor, or in the case of shift operations, the supervisor on the previous shift who will be responsible to arrange for coverage should the employee be unable to attend work. Having an option to simply "leave a message" again suggests that the supervisor's having this information is not valued, therefore undermining the importance of the expectation that employees develop good attendance.

- D. In the previous paragraph, the actual execution of such a policy cannot be attained unless the organization provides training for supervisors and rank-and-file employees about the manner in which such reports should be recorded and the information needed at the time of the report.

- E. Many of an organization's supervisors are not presently able to fulfill expectations in helping employees perform their best, particularly where the supervisor must exhibit excellent communication skills. Therefore agencies might implement more systematic supervisory training programs.

4. Ability

- A. Where employees are truly ill or injured and therefore disabled, the employer should not suggest that individuals not use sick leave or, where appropriate, workers compensation benefits. However, employers may develop programs to encourage good health and reduce injuries. Such programs might include:
- Helping employees to quit smoking;
 - Establishing stress management programs;
 - Establishing diet workshops or other "good health" programs;
 - Identifying methods to avoid on-the-job injuries, e.g. programs on "lifting" or other common sources of injury.
- B. In some cases individuals have childcare responsibilities that interfere with their ability to arrive at work on time or attend work regularly. Some agencies have created on-site day care opportunities for staff, an alternative which assists parents in developing their capacity to improve attendance at work.
- C. Where employees work in areas which are less accessible to public transportation, the organization can help employees organize car pools or negotiate with public transportation authorities for more convenient schedules.

- D. A common problem which interferes with regular attendance is drug or alcohol addiction or other personal problems. An organization can choose to establish, or, if already established, increase support for Employee Assistance Programs. E.A.P. can be a means of directing employees to such programs as Alcoholics Anonymous.

- E. Some jobs may permit establishment of flexible schedules, an alternative which can reduce the amount of lost time due to chronic lateness associated with child care, elder care or transportation problems.