

Misunderstanding or Manipulation: Employee's creative approach to work hours



Organizations are required to make an effort to accommodate their employees under more and more circumstances including providing different types of leave and accommodation in the workplace for disability, health, family and caregiver status and more. On top of these required accommodations more organizations are choosing to accommodate employees wish for more flexibility by offering changes to the structure of work including flex time and virtual work options. However, all of these options can lead to opportunities for confusion, mistakes and manipulation.

For a manager there is a lot to navigate. Recently we were presented with the following scenario whereby an employee seemed to be taking advantage of a situation. Here is the scenario, consider what you think is going on and how you would have responded.

Situation: A manager agreed to let an employee adjust his work schedule temporarily to attend a series of competitions in which the employee's child was participating. This adjustment included not only taking off several partial days from work and leaving early on many occasions, but also allowing the employee to monitor and report his own hours worked in lieu. Once the competition was completed the employee continued to adjust his schedule.

On two occasions the manager has casually reminded the employee that he needed to return to the schedule but the employee continued to references his child's activities as reasons he kept adjusting his schedule.

What do you think, was this a case of misunderstanding or manipulation?

People Are People First

Really knowing what is going on in the situation is much easier said than done. In this case the employee may have come to believe that he was entitled to the creative schedule or he may simply be taking advantage. Without clear evidence one way or the other is it important to focus on what is known and not what it thought.

All people operate on different emotional and psychological levels all the time. These emotions color our conversations and how we react to others often in very unconscious ways. When the truth is unknown It is usually better to address the situation neutrally and head on.

Managing the Psychology of the Conversation

Sometimes handling a situation too delicately gives the person whose behaviour you are trying to manage the opportunity to misinterpret information. There can be merit to calling in an employee and addressing the situation directly. For this meeting to be effective it should have the following features:

1. **Be called by the manager** and take place between the manager and employee alone.
2. **Formally scheduled** and happen in an office space. If the manager does not have a private office then a meeting room is an alternative. Formally schedule should not include the manager saying can I see you in my office in a few minutes. The manager should say I need to schedule a meeting with you, I am available at time x today or time x tomorrow.
3. **Be very brief** and scheduled as such for 15 minutes (tell the manager to hold 30 minutes but tell the employee 15 minutes and try to stick to 15 minutes).
4. **Focussed only on this one topic**. At this point in time this meeting is not a disciplinary meeting and performance is not the issue being discussed at this meeting. The meeting has one talking point – the return to an agreeable schedule. The manager should be prepared with specific examples of days and times the employee has not followed the previously agreed upon schedule.
5. **Formally informal**: The meeting itself should be relaxed and the manager should not show any anger or negative emotions. The more the manager can be casual by saying something like 'I just wanted us to get on the same page regarding your work schedule' the less likely the employee will act defensively and with negative emotions. When negative emotions stand at the forefront of a conversation everything is filtered through fear and the primary message can be lost.
6. **Recognition of manager's responsibility**. The meeting should not seem accusatory. One way to help set the tone is for the manager to take responsibility and apologize for not being initially clear in his communications of the short-term nature of the previous accommodation and not following up sooner to clarify the situation.
7. **Provide next step options**. Be prepared with very clear next steps. Ask if there are any reasons the employee cannot work within the originally agreed upon structure hours of work. If there are options for change consider them first and be prepared to offer them, for example:
 1. Working fewer hours and moving to the role of a part-time employee
 2. Working in a different role or different team or department
- If options for virtual work or alternate shifts are realistic then include these options
8. **Wrap up** – Thank the employee for listening and say you look forward to the continued work of this employee. However, there is no need to spend time praising the employee for specific work or saying how valuable the employee is because this can actually distract the employee from focussing on what was just covered.

Determining if the employee was purposely taking advantage or really just confused should not be the focus. Focus on what you can change or manage and that is not the past but the present and the future.