What Can I say? Approaching an Employee Attendance Management Conversation



Attendance management seems to have become a more complicated issue these days as a more flexible and contingent workplace smashes up against an employer's ability to manage the presence of their employees and the increase in employee absenteeism. How does an organization enforce an employee attendance policy when workforces are comprised of part-time, contract, temporary and flex employees who work different hours and have different expectations? Add into this situation legislated leaves and the requirement for accommodation for disability and family situation and there are a lot of layers to consider.

Yet, it does remain that an organization has the right to expect employees will perform their duties as agreed to including being available when and where expected.

Three Steps Lay The Ground Work For Attendance Management Conversations

1) Agreements and Expectations

Begin with the creation of attendance management policies and an employment agreement that both parties agree to.

2) Record Keeping

The task of gathering and maintaining attendance records for all employees is required. This allows an organization to both define a standard expectation and track the attendance of employees for purposes of attendance management.

3) Communication

Communication on attendance expectations begins upon hire and continues on a regular basis. It is important that an employee first knows the expectations and then knows when he/she is headed off the expected path.

A key part of communication involves gathering information from an employee so the organization is aware of any problems including disability, family situation or other potential issues.

The 4th Step – Begin to Address the Issue

4) Change Management

If the first 3 elements have been well managed and an attendance problem has occurred then the purpose of attendance management should be to facilitate change. This change can include changing the working conditions if appropriate and feasible (changing the employees hours for example) or asking the employee to change behaviours.

Within your attendance management policy the steps for addressing excessive or culpable absences in the workplace should involve a series of conversations with the employee, often divided into informal and formal meetings. Here are some suggestions for what to say in these meetings

- **Informal meeting:** Expression of interest and desire to be of assistance.***"Joe, it has come to our attention that your attendance at work is not what we expected. You have been late on numerous occasions and missed 3 days of work in the past 4 weeks. Is there anything wrong which we can help you with?'***

If Joe says that everything is fine, he just had a few additional challenges this month you should probe further.

"Are these challenges tied to anything that may reoccur in the near future?"

By asking about the future you are focussed on what can be changed not what has already passed. Based on what the employee responds can ask another follow-up question.
"Can we provided you with any assistance or accommodation now that will help you reduce or better manage the situation if it arises again?'

If the employee does not indicate any need for accommodation you can close by reiterating the importance of future work attendance.
'If you have your situation managed that is good to hear. Let me close by clarifying our expectations and process related to attendance to make sure we all understand the same information. . . .'

This is your opportunity to review your expectations for the employee's attendance for the future.

- **First Formal Meeting:** If an employee's attendance continues to be of concern a formal meeting should be requested. This may or may not be a component of a formal progressive disciplinary process.

"Several weeks ago we talked informally about your attendance at work as you had missed several days and been late on numerous occasions. Here is a letter with information about your absences [you do not need to review the details of the document, simply provide it].

' When we talked last time you indicated there was no particular cause for your attendance issues and that you did not believe they would continue. Unfortunately we have noticed that your attendance continues to be a challenge. Is there anything you would like to share with us regarding your ongoing absences from work?'

If the employee indicates there is an explanation that requires accommodation you can agree to discuss this further and explore what accommodation is available and appropriate.

If your employee indicates there are no extenuating circumstances or if the circumstances do not involve illness, injury or other non-culpable reason then you can review the situation, the employee's options and your expectations in more

detail. Wrap up by asking your employee if he/she can agree to changes to help improve the situation.

‘We value our ability to work with our employees to address situations that can impact performance at work. Can we work together to make some changes so you can continue to make a contribution to the organization?

“I would like to hear your ideas for changes that will help you meet our expectations and thought we could discuss some of mine. . . ’

‘Thank you for agreeing to work with me on this item. I would like to propose the following next steps in the process . . . ‘

Most employees want to make it work, but often don’t know how and if they are backed into a corner react. By approaching the situation and the conversations well you can create an opportunity for change.