

Anna Shields: How conflict resolution and mediation can decrease workplace absence

Workplace absenteeism has a massive impact on UK business. Whilst employers expect employees to miss a certain number of days a year due to coughs, colds and minor illnesses, excessive absences can lead to decreased productivity and a negative impact on an organisation's bottom line. Figures from the Office of National Statistics show that 131 million days were lost to sickness absence in the UK in 2013. Research by the CBI found that absenteeism costs the UK economy around £14 billion a year, with sick days alone costing UK organisations £29 billion a year. Absence is still on the rise despite determined and sustained efforts by employers to stem the tide with initiatives such as Employee Assistant Programmes (EAPs), line management awareness training, and better management of mental and physical health issues. Even flexible and remote working has failed to make a noticeable dent in the figures. It is time UK organisations tackled the root causes of absenteeism rather than simply deal with the fall out.

To do this, we need to first understand what causes absence. Because if managers don't have a clear understanding of the causes of absenteeism, they are unable to effectively tackle it. This is likely to result in additional expenses incurred by an organisation to cover the gaps with temporary staff or overtime costs in addition to the drain on the managers' time and productivity. In addition to costing organisations money, absence creates pressure on other members of the workforce, impacting morale, engagement and productivity. The CBI study highlights the fact that absence can account for between 20 to 40 per cent of net lost productivity per day.

The link between absence and stress

The ONS statistics are clear: of the 131 million days lost per year, 15 million of these are directly attributable to stress. A CIPD survey in 2014 with SimplyHealth backs this up, with two-fifths of survey respondents commenting that stress-related absence had increased over the past year. Research by the Health and Safety Executive indicated that stress at work is not just the result of long hours and worries over job security. A significant cause of stress is due to poor workplace relationships and conflict between individuals. People are the driving force in organisations and their interpersonal relationships can be a source of conflict and stress. If individuals feel isolated, unfairly treated, perceive that they are being bullied or poorly managed, then that will have a hugely negative impact on them. Conflict between colleagues or managers and employees can lead to lower job satisfaction, disengagement, poor morale and a drop in productivity. We all know that stress has a huge impact on our mental and physical health and the workplace is no different. In April 2014, the European Agency for Safety and Health At Work launched a two year campaign "Healthy Workplaces Manage Stress". The Agency recognises the clear link between stress and absenteeism. Their findings were that 51% of respondents thought workplace stress was common and four in 10 thought that it was not handled well. The link is clear; conflict between people at work causes unacceptable high levels of stress, which can lead them to avoid work all together.

Why does conflict cause stress?

Conflict triggers an actual physical reaction in a person's body. It's a fight or flight response. Our body's primitive, automatic and inborn response prepares the body to either 'fight' or 'flee' from perceived attack, harm, or threat to survival. When a person experiences stress through interpersonal conflict at work, this reaction is triggered. Our brain initiates a sequence of nerve cell firing and chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol are released into our bloodstream. The body undergoes a series of dramatic changes. For example, our respiratory rate increases, our blood is redirected from the digestive tract to our muscles and limbs, our pupils dilate, our awareness intensifies, our impulses quicken and we move into a mode of 'attack'. With this heightened awareness, we are more likely to have a distorted view of workplace situations which may lead us to overreact to the slightest comment made by someone we are in conflict with.

How conflict resolution and mediation can decrease workplace absence

As explained above, stress is a huge contributor to workplace absence and conflict is a significant cause of workplace stress. Thus, by reducing workplace conflict, we can start to tackle the cause and cost of absenteeism head on. If an organisation can develop a culture of conflict resolution, then conflict will be nipped in the bud, rather than left to fester and grow, causing the stress that may lead to absenteeism. Organisations need to establish a process which allows individuals in conflict to find an informal resolution to their issues quickly and effectively. If you are able to support an individual in conflict at the outset, you might prevent a complete breakdown in workplace relationships and the attendant stress that causes. To achieve this, there are two key steps an organisation can take to dramatically reduce levels of stress-related absenteeism. The first is to institute a culture and strategy of conflict resolution. This could take the form of better line manager training in how to have those tricky conversations, listening techniques for employees or even training in communication models to diffuse conflict. The culture of an organisation needs to promote openness, dialogue, honesty and integrity. If you give people the right environment for their voice to be heard and their differences to be accepted, then you are taking positive steps to stop conflict before it even begins.

The second step is to ensure that there are strategies in place to deal with existing conflict. Mediation is a technique that can be a powerful intervention with a high success rate. It is a confidential, voluntary and informal process that allows

employees in conflict to have open and honest conversations with each other. It allows them to clarify the issues that so often lead to communication breakdowns and misunderstandings. Unlike a formal process, mediation focuses on re-establishing a working relationship without the need of punishment or finding a victim or perpetrator. Mediation offers a safe environment in which to have a difficult conversation which focuses on resolving issues in a way that is mutually acceptable to the parties. Because the mediator does not thrust a solution upon the parties, the outcome is owned by the parties which means that they are empowered through the process and more likely to stick to their resolution.

Conclusion

Absenteeism is causing a headache for UK business. It costs time, money and manpower to deal with, and drains productivity, engagement and morale. Because of the current tough market that businesses operate in, organisations hampered with high levels of absenteeism will be behind the curve. As we have seen above, there is a clear link between workplace stress caused by conflict and high levels of absenteeism. By dealing with the root cause of this conflict, you are tackling the negative knock-on impact of conflict. Conflict resolution strategies such as mediation training can be highly effective in addressing, managing and minimising conflict. Because the very nature of mediation is consensual, the results are sustainable and far reaching. If organisations embrace mediation as a technique to deal with workplace conflict, they can actively and effectively decrease their absenteeism levels.

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