

How can HR eradicate serial staff 'sickies'?

HR plays a vital role in ensuring team members are healthy, energised and engaged



BY HRD / 20 Feb 2019 / Share [f](#) [t](#) [in](#) [✉](#)

It's hardly news to suggest that some employees who take sick leave aren't genuine in their illness, according to Karen Gately, founder of Corporate Dojo.

Gately added that the reality is that staff access personal leave for a myriad of reasons, some of which reflect critical culture and engagement issues HR and leaders are wise to address.

According to Gately, the most common implications of high rates of absenteeism are lost momentum of critical initiatives, project budget and time blow outs, turnover of high performing team members, and company brand damage.

“While HR plays a vital role in ensuring the team are healthy, energised and engaged, the biggest difference at the end of the day is made by the leaders of your business,” said Gately. She added that it’s important to prioritise the development of every leader’s ability to adopt a coaching attitude and approach to working with each member of their team.

“When leaders know their people, inspire them to strive, invest in their development and hold them accountable for the promises they make to themselves and the organisation, sickies are very likely to be rare.”

Fundamentally, overcoming absenteeism takes creating a cultural environment that inspires people to want to give their best, added Gately.

“Understanding why that isn’t already the case is key to identifying and addressing underlying causes.” According to Gately, the most important steps HR can take to eradicate ‘sickies’ from any organisation include the following:

Engage leaders

Guide leaders to understand the extent of the issue - including the real cost to your business of people taking unscheduled time out. Help them to appreciate that some of this capacity can be recaptured by ensuring people want to be there. The reality is shifting the problem takes engagement of every leader and ensuring their approach has a positive impact on your organisation's culture.

Make the health and well-being of your people a strategic priority

Educate leaders about the link between the strength of your team's spirit and optimising commercial results. Help them also to understand that when people are energised, and their mental health is strong, they are entirely more likely to engage, and invest the full depth of their potential in their role and your organisation.

Reserve judgement

Having a lack of integrity or an attitude of entitlement are of course among the reasons people 'chuck a sickie'. Just as common however are those people who call in sick when in fact there are other issues going on for them that they don't feel safe to reveal to their employer.

Talk to people about why they are struggling to be at work and be compassionate to the need for people to balance the priorities of work and the rest of their life. Understand what is going on for people before deciding upon the most appropriate course of action.

Make it safe to be honest

Most people will be reluctant to call their boss and say I'm really tired, or 'mentally fried' and I need to take a day to recharge. Instead, they call in and say, I'm feeling sick or I need to care for someone else who is sick. Clearly this is dishonest however, sometimes people choose to tell what they regard as 'white lies' to create the space for them to prioritise their own wellbeing or that of their family.

Be pragmatic

Some organisations are beginning to accept the simple reality that at times people just need time to rest and recharge. An unscheduled day off can make a big difference to our ability to maintain the energy levels needed to perform at our best. If there isn't a critical reason someone needs to be at work on a particular day, give them the option of calling a brief time out if they really need it.

Call out sickies

When it becomes evident that someone is simply taking advantage of what they perceive to be an entitlement to use up their leave balance, address the issue head on.

Of course, it's important to respect everyone's right to take personal leave due to ill health, however it's also critical that you hold people accountable for behaving in ways that reflect a lack of commitment and integrity.

Leave no room for doubt

Set very clear expectations about the importance of being a reliable member of the team. Make this clear from the beginning of every individual's employment, and through coaching feedback, reinforce what being reliable means in your business.

Hold people accountable

Be prepared to exit from your business, people who are unwilling to shift their attitude or approach. If you have provided fair opportunity to understand your expectations and reasonable support to change their behaviour, and someone continues to be unreliable, it's time for them to go.