



**Focus on Human Resources - "Employee absenteeism is an early warning sign of sinking productivity."**

**IF YOU WERE CAPTAIN OF THE TITANIC, WOULD YOU HAVE SEEN THAT ICEBERG IN TIME?**

*By Allan Milder*

As with icebergs, employee behavior problems are often not visible until they become a crisis. The knack of perceiving the problem early enough to take corrective action can help ensure your ship doesn't sink. In fact, early intervention usually translates into higher productivity, better employee morale, improved customer service and increased profitability.

One of the most common early warning signs that an 'iceberg' is on the horizon is absenteeism and/or tardiness. Ask yourself the following questions, and the answers may show you the tip of the iceberg.

1. Do any of your employees usually request time off at the last minute or even after the workday has begun?
2. Do any employees constantly use all their accrued time as soon as they earn it?
3. Do any employees frequently have unexplained periods during the workday when they have 'personal business' that requires them to leave their job?
4. Do any employees consider time off without pay as an entitlement that you cannot deny?
5. Is there a pattern to an employee's absenteeism, e.g., day after payday, day before or after weekends, arriving late, leaving early, long lunches, etc.?
6. Are any of your employees consistently unavailable to work required overtime when reasonable notice is provided?

Sound managerial practice includes managing attendance. If you assume people get 2 weeks vacation, and 10 days of paid holidays, then a full time employee is expected to work 48 weeks per year.

Deducting a reasonable amount of additional time for normal 'sick time' might represent 10 more days, leaving you with 46 weeks of work from each person. With a 40 hour workweek that leaves you with an expectation of approximately 1840 hours per year. Every week of unexpected missed time, including time off without pay, reduces your productivity for that person by more than 2%, leaving work undone, done by other workers, or done by you. For some businesses, productivity of the entire operation drops dramatically whenever a key employee or two is not there.

Employee requests for time off should therefore be evaluated based on workload, the effect on customers and other employees, and the requesting employee's track record, including but not limited to the answers to the six questions listed above. It's OK to say no! In fact, if you feel the request should not be approved, it may be helpful to have a conversation with the employee. While they may not like your decision, it is important for them to see that you have business reasons for denying the request and you are not being unfair or arbitrary. By setting these boundaries, you are making it clear to your employees what is expected of them.

Often when you begin addressing attendance issues you will realize that there are other performance or behavior problems that need to also be considered. This is how you can use the early identification of problems to hopefully prevent the problems from getting out of control and causing great harm to your business. Often when you do address these problems early, the employee will show improvement and the other employees will appreciate that you are dealing with the issue in a fair but firm manner.

Your ship does not need to sink, and as the Captain it is up to you to be on the alert and act when icebergs are still far enough away to be avoided.

For additional information about managing attendance and other HR-related issues, please contact Sharon Ely at [sely@infinite-ws.com](mailto:sely@infinite-ws.com) or call 512-271-9700, ext. 209.