

Absenteeism in the public sector

“They can’t all be ill” said someone looking at high absence figures in part of the public sector. They probably were not. Some private sector organisations have an absenteeism problem. There it is usually a sign of low morale, poor leadership, poorly structured jobs. Some parts of the public sector suffer from high absentee rates too. Senior public sector managers need to change their organisations so more people turn up. The public sector probably has to have 1% more staff to cover for excess absence.

Anyone who is ill should of course have time off to have it checked out and to recover. The flu ridden employee or the staff member with an infectious cold may do more harm than good struggling in to work, only to spread the disease more. The issue is the employees who claim they are sick because they wish to extend the week-end, have a hangover from excessive drinking the night before, have better things to do than turn up for work. I once had to help senior managers tackle high absenteeism in a factory environment. The factory needed improving in all sorts of ways to make it a better working environment, which management did. They fired the worst offender who took far too much time off when they could prove they were not ill. This had a galvanising effect. Management was congratulated by other staff members who said they were fed up having to cover for that person when they knew it was not illness. General standards rose as a result.

If you wish to manage something you need to show it matters and explain what you want to achieve. It must be fair and sensible. The aim here is not to make people feel they mustn’t be ill, or hurry them when they need rest and treatment. The aim here is to deal with abuse. That needs to be explained. You then need to measure and monitor it, to see if the team follow the new policy laid out.

Figures can be revealing. If there is an outbreak of flu then you would expect a big surge in absence. If the absence figures shows a cluster of non attendance on Fridays or Mondays, or on hot days or days when there are major events or functions, suspicions should be aroused. You should also know your workforce well enough to help them realise their wishes whilst still doing a decent week’s work. If there is a big football match on tv they all want to watch, then consider letting them do that at work. You’ll lose 100 minutes, not the whole day, and have some goodwill.