



What's Next? 12 Quick Tips for Managing Your Employee's Health-Related Employment Disruption

Here's a set of 12 practical ideas for managing what happens in your workplace after an employee reports that a medical condition is affecting his or her ability to work. These tips are based on our observations of what has worked best for thousands of employers. Following these suggestions will help you get the situation off on the right track and keep it there—which will help your employee recover quickly, get your workplace back to normal, and avoid needless benefit outlays.

12 Quick Management Tips

1. Immediately and visibly take charge.
2. Realize you are setting the tone.
3. Practice the golden rule right from the start.
4. Reach out to your benefits handler for assistance.
5. Expect the employee to recover while on the job.
6. Aim for a “win-win”.
7. Look for the easy ways to adjust work temporarily.
8. If work caused the problem, do something about it.
9. If it is a work-related problem, let your insurer help smooth the medical care process.
10. Maintain routine and discipline.
11. Stay in touch with an employee who is not working.
12. Show your loyalty to strengthen theirs.

1. Immediately and visibly take charge.

Time is of the essence! As soon as you learn of a problem, make a quick assessment then take visible and appropriate action. Those who wonder whether you'll stand by them when they're “down” will be reassured. Those who might be tempted to take advantage of “the system” will lose their nerve when you make it clear you are going to be on top of things.

2. Realize that you are setting the tone.

The way you respond to this employee may make them eager to stay at or get back to work, or make them decide to stall as long as possible – or even to contact a lawyer immediately. As a manager, your personal feelings about this person or event are irrelevant. You need to get the situation off on the right track. Do not joke or make inappropriate comments. If you're feeling upset, remember this: Stick to the facts and follow company policy.

3. Practice the golden rule from the start.

You can handle this situation in a manner that protects the person standing before you – and your company. Respond to them in the same way you would want someone to respond to you if you were feeling vulnerable – kindly, helpfully, and firmly. Your employee may remember it forever, and tell others what you did. Make those stories good ones!

4. Reach out to your benefits handler for assistance.

When an episode begins, you should notify the benefits people right away. They may be able to help you find appropriate temporary tasks and make return to work plans, and give you some pointers on modifying work stations and re-designing processes to prevent additional problems. Also, if you believe that benefits abuse is a possibility, do not play amateur doctor, detective, or lawyer. Tell your insurer what you think and get them involved.

5. Expect the employee to recover while on the job.

From the start, make it clear that you are counting on the employee to contribute whatever they can to the company during their recuperation. Tell the employee to ask their doctor for an “activity prescription” that describes what they can safely do at work and at home while recovering – and to give you a copy of the form. Work together with the employee to find something productive they can do as soon as they can get out of the house or function.

6. Aim for a “win-win”.

People recover faster if they stay active and keep busy. Sitting at home can make a person start to worry that they're “too disabled” to work anymore. Keeping people at work means your company is allowing them to contribute something instead of

sitting home getting paid for doing nothing. It also reduces what the insurance company has to pay out – which will help your company control its benefits costs.

7. Look for the easy ways to adjust work temporarily.

Some ideas include: (A) having the employee do their regular job but re-arranging their work station or assigning someone else to do the things that put the most demands on the affected body part, (B) taking more frequent breaks or shortening the work day, (C) working every other day or on another shift, (D) doing a special project, (E) helping out another group or department, (F) tackling those tasks that no one has ever found time to do, (G) quality control or process improvement, (H) mentoring new employees, or (I) taking some refresher training or cross-training. It should be real work, but you can reduce productivity expectations in the short term to permit on-the-job recovery. Note: This is a different process than making a reasonable accommodation for a person with a long-term impairment under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). A good permanent accommodation should allow the employee to be fully productive.

8. If work caused the problem, do something about it.

If the employee says the problem was caused by work or made worse by it, be curious. It may reveal a weak spot – an opportunity to improve your safety / injury prevention program. Thoroughly investigate the circumstances that allowed this to happen. Take steps to prevent harming this person, as well as future injury to others. Once injured, many employees worry about their own safety and that of co-workers. Let them know how you solved the problem.

9. If it is a work-related problem, let your insurer help smooth the medical care process.

The injured person will probably appreciate your help getting to a doctor. Your claims handler will be able to suggest a nearby medical facility that is willing and able to see your employee promptly. They will know whether your state laws allow you to direct where the employee goes for care. The injured person's

supervisor or another manager should drive them to the medical facility. If the injury is serious, call the employee's family right away so they can come in to provide support.

10. Maintain routine and discipline.

Remain the manager of the person with the medical condition. Tell them their assignment is to get better and to contribute what they can while doing so. Sometimes employees with performance or behavior problems file workers' compensation claims or abuse sick leave or disability benefits. Make sure to separate the issues. Seek input from your HR department as well as your benefits handler; then make a plan for how to handle both issues.

11. Stay in touch with an employee who is not working.

Don't ignore your absent employee. Neglect causes problems. Assign someone in your company to stay in contact. The employee's supervisor is usually best. Let the employee know they are missed and you look forward to their return. Keep asking the employee if they have any questions, then really listen to their concerns, and get them the answers. Don't pry for details or put pressure on them. They should feel good about your call.

12. Show your loyalty to strengthen theirs.

Actions that speak louder than words include: (a) counseling the employee about benefits the company offers that might be helpful now, such as an Employee Assistance Program or other health and wellness benefits, (b) sending flowers or get well cards signed by boss and co-workers, (c) having someone offer a helping hand with chores like mowing the lawn or shoveling snow. Gratitude for the company's kindness will naturally make the employee want to repay you – by coming to work.

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