

Ah Choo, The Sound of a Cold in the Workplace

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



A friend of mine is a supervisor at a mid-size local company. As a result of layoffs in recent years, she has seen the size of her staff decrease and her workload increase. And this explains why she has developed a rather hard-nosed attitude about her employees taking sick leave.

My friend's bottom line: Although the company provides sick leave – eight paid days off a year for full-time staff – her employees better be dying to take it.

My friend doesn't totally lack compassion. She stocks a cabinet in her office with numerous over-the-counter pain and cold-relief medications, as well as vitamins. She is a big believer that Vitamin C will ward off multiple maladies.

And she lets it be widely known that workers can help themselves to her cabinet – as she describes it, they can “steal” whatever they want. Her theory is that if they help themselves, she can't be blamed for any unfortunate results. I have tried to dissuade her of that idea, but I will leave a discussion of her “liability” for a future column.

But as the cold and flu season begins, I will pose today's question: Is my friend better off having her workers show up sick, or giving them time off?

My answer: It depends.

Certainly in this recession-plagued economy, I can understand her attitude, which exists at many companies, to view employees who call in sick as “slackers.” And with fewer employees to pick up the workload, perhaps an employee showing up who has only a few pistons hitting is better than having none.

I also can understand the attitude of many workers who are afraid to call in sick. Who wants to be viewed as a “slacker” and a target for future layoffs? Besides, if they take a day off because they are sick, likely their work will just be piling up and waiting for them when they return.

Unless the job involves strenuous physical, outdoor labor, many workers conclude: If I am going to be sick, I might as well go to work and be sick there. The term for that behavior is “presenteeism.”

According to a variety of studies, the total cost of presenteeism to U.S. employers ranges from \$150 billion to \$250 billion a year. This includes the cost of lost production and the spread of illnesses to other employees and their families from exposure to sick co-workers. Employees who refuse to call in sick also may take longer to recover and encounter costly medical complications.

A CareerBuilder survey published earlier this year revealed 72 percent of respondents said they typically go to work when they are sick. More than half said they feel guilty if they call in sick. Fifty-three percent said they have gotten sick from a co-worker who came to work sick.

Deciding to call in sick – or ordering a sick worker home – is not a simple dollars-and-cents computation. It is a complicated decision based on personal circumstances, the work environment and everyone’s needs – both the employee’s and the employer’s needs.

Some symptoms that often result in a worker calling in sick include: fever; achy joints; persistent and “productive” cough; severe sore throat; vomiting and diarrhea; and red eyes, with a discharge. With any of these symptoms, it also would be a good idea for a worker to consult with his doctor.

But for most of us, our symptoms fall in the “wobbler” category: Sniffles; throat tickle; ear ache; sinus infection; and obnoxious dry cough. We may be recovering from some of the more severe “stay home” symptoms, or just coming down with an illness.

Some steps to take to keep a common cold from becoming an epidemic that rips through an entire workforce include:

- **Sick leave policies** -- Companies should have policies in place that encourage workers to stay home if they are truly sick.
- **Cross train employees** – Create a “company culture” that enables co-workers to continue to perform the job duties of employees who have called in sick.
- **Accommodate** – If a sick employee believes – for whatever reason – that he cannot take time off work, can he telecommute? In other words, can he work from home?
- **Isolate** – Can a sick worker be moved to a private office or other space away from co-workers? Perhaps co-workers can be moved away from the sick worker who showed up to perform some “essential” task.
- **Encourage good hygiene** – Germs can travel by air – as in an unblocked sneeze – or by hands. A worker who coughs into his hand and then shakes yours will likely spread his cold. A sick worker and co-workers should avoid shaking hands, wash their hands often and use hand sanitizers. Don’t use equipment, such as telephones and keyboards, used by someone who is sick. Clean contaminated surfaces, such as washrooms, counters tops, copy machines, door handles.
- **Minimize meetings** – If colds and the flu are ripping through a workforce, hold meetings on a “must have” basis and discourage workers who may be coming down with an illness or recovering from attending.

A variety of ethical and practical factors should go into an employee’s decision to call in sick. Most of our jobs consist of us providing good services and products to our customers. Are we healthy enough to do that? Can we go to work without infecting our co-workers? Will we benefit or hurt our employer by showing up? Are we hurting ourselves by going to work, rather than staying home to recover from an illness?

The decision to call in sick is not “all about you.” The well-being of your employer and co-workers depend on you getting it right, as well.

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