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# Absenteeism in Remission: Planning, Policy, Culture

Dan R. Dalton  
*Indiana University*

Cathy A. Enz  
*Cornell University, cae4@cornell.edu*

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# Absenteeism in Remission: Planning, Policy, Culture

## **Abstract**

It has been estimated that employee absenteeism costs the U.S. economy on the order of \$40 billion per year. Not surprisingly, great time and effort has been dedicated to research assessing the causes of employee absenteeism with the obvious goal of reducing its incidence in the workplace. It is argued in this article that much of this effort has been of virtually no practical value to the practicing manager. In fact, the prescriptions that would naturally arise from much of this research would almost certainly land managers in the lap of litigation in federal court. Two promising strategies —attention to absence policy and absence culture—are described in this article. Both have the advantage of practical application as well as a distinguished tradition in reducing absenteeism.

## **Keywords**

absenteeism, managers, human resources, policy

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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# Absenteeism in Remission: Planning, Policy, Culture

Dan R.. Dalton and Cathy A. Enz

## **Executive Summary**

*It has been estimated that employee absenteeism costs the U.S. economy on the order of \$40 billion per year. Not surprisingly, great time and effort has been dedicated to research assessing the causes of employee absenteeism with the obvious goal of reducing its incidence in the workplace. It is argued in this article that much of this effort has been of virtually no practical value to the practicing manager. In fact, the prescriptions that would naturally arise from much of this research would almost certainly land managers in the lap of litigation in federal court. Two promising strategies—attention to absence policy and absence culture—are described in this article. Both have the advantage of practical application as well as a distinguished tradition in reducing absenteeism.*

The Wall Street Journal (July 29, 1986:1) recently noted the following:

The Research Institute of America estimates a one-day absence by a clerical worker can cost a company up to \$100 in reduced efficiency and increased supervisory workload. It figures absenteeism's total productivity drain on the U.S. economy at nearly \$40 billion a year.

It has also been reported that for every 0.5 percent of change in national absence rates in the United States, the gross national product goes down by \$10 billion (Steers & Rhodes, 1984). In fact, it has been estimated that employee absenteeism costs General Motors, a single corporation, some \$1 billion per year (Dilts, Deitsch, & Paul, 1984).

The Metropolitan Life Foundation recently sponsored an advertisement which appeared in most of the major business periodicals. Its message is straightforward: over one million American workers who are otherwise employed will not attend work on any given day.

In the United States the absenteeism rate—percentage of absenteeism to total scheduled hours—ranges from two to three percent, although higher rates in the 16–20% range have been reported (Leigh, 1986; Cascio, 1982). Some perspective can be added to these levels by noting that, over the ten-year period from 1966-1975, approximately forty-one million person-days were lost to strike activity in the United States (Department of Labor, 1976). In contrast, it is estimated that over 400 million person-days are lost each year as a result of employee absenteeism! (Yolles, Carone, & Krinsky, 1975). In fact, over the same period, employee absenteeism in hours lost was some 40% as large as the total number of hours lost to unemployment (Leigh, 1986).

Given the evident frequency of absenteeism and its associated expense, the subject of employee absenteeism has received a great deal of attention. Those efforts have had a common objective: to determine the causes and reduce the incidence of employee absenteeism in the workplace (e.g., Dilts, Deitsch, & Paul, 1985; Goodamn & Atkin, 1984; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, & Brown, 1982; Muchinsky, 1977; Steers & Rhodes, 1978).

Despite these and many other efforts, critics feel strongly that much of the absence research does not serve the practicing manager (e.g., Goodman & Atkin, 1984). In fact, it has been concluded that "A heavy investment of research effort on absenteeism has failed to generate significant dividends, whether one's criterion is the prediction, explanation, or control of absence" (Johns & Nicholson, 1982:14). This may be an overly harsh view but it is not without some substance.

### ***So Much Work . . . So Little Help***

Investigations directed at the causes and remedies for absenteeism have been referred to as "bewildering" (Dilts, Deitsch, & Paul, 1985:4) and concede that much of the research in the traditional study of absenteeism "is not designed to be very informative" (Fichman, 1984:2). Others have referred to it as a "veritable constellation of diverse variables . . . [and have] identified 209 such variables" (Mowday & Steers, 1984:223). These are relatively serious indictments which in concert suggest that factors which have been reported to lead to employee absenteeism are of little, if any, practical value to the manager.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that women have a tendency to be absent from work more than men. Or, suppose that it can be demonstrated that employees with more children have a tendency to be disproportionately absent. What practical value is that information? Presumably, no responsible organization would choose to hire only men to rectify the former situation: to do so would constitute an egregious violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As for the latter, what reasonable organization would discriminate in its hiring based on the size of an applicant's family? Suppose, once again hypothetically, that it could be established that older employees are more likely to be absent than younger employees. A clear violation of the Age Discrimination Act would result if an organization, in order to reduce its overall absenteeism, refused to hire employees over 40 years of age.

We would argue then that such information, even if it were valid, is of virtually no value to the practicing manager. Rather, management benefits only if information about the incidence of absenteeism leads to procedures which reduce it without being in violation of the law or being completely impractical. In addition, acceptable practices to reduce absenteeism should be relatively inexpensive to administer and should not rely on harsh disciplinary procedures.

We suggest that there are two promising developments which can be considered in the reduction of employee absenteeism that meet these expense and disciplinary criteria: 1) the adoption of responsible absenteeism policies, and 2) the establishment of less permissive absence cultures in the workplace. Each of these is discussed in turn.

### ***Toward Responsible Absenteeism Policy***

All absenteeism is not—nor should it be—subject to reduction. Some level of employee absenteeism is unavoidable: people are occasionally ill and circumstances do arise which make it nearly impossible for employees to attend work. Such largely unavoidable absenteeism has been referred to as Type A.

There is, however, persuasive evidence that much employee absenteeism is avoidable - so-called Type B absence (Chadwick-Jones, Brown, & Nicholson, 1973). In fact, it appears from a series of recent reports that some absenteeism may be a deliberate strategy used by employees to avoid work. Given this, it is true that some portion of employee absenteeism is subject to control and management (e.g., Dalton & Perry, 1981; Winkler, 1981; Dilts, Deitsch, & Paul, 1985).

There is an interesting factor which is consistent with our contention that some absenteeism can be reduced. We know that employee absenteeism is not equally distributed. Nearly forty years ago, Walker (1947) demonstrated that a relatively small percentage of individuals in the workplace are responsible for a disproportionate share of the total absenteeism (see also, Garrison & Muchinsky, 1977; Ivancevich, 1985;

Yolles, Carone, & Krinsky, 1975). Moreover, it has recently been argued that an individual's past absenteeism is a very good predictor of future absenteeism (Morgan & Herman, 1976; Breaugh, 1981; Keller, 1983; Winkler, 1980). It would appear that individuals who have been absent are evidently not hesitant to be so again. These examinations lead to troubling conclusion:

The results indicate that for some employees absenteeism provides an opportunity to experience consequences that tend to encourage absenteeism and that are not offset by organizational controlled consequences that would tend to deter absenteeism (Morgan & Herman, 1976:738).

In order to reduce employee absenteeism, then, a key issue would be what exactly constitutes "organizational controlled consequences that would tend to deter absenteeism." Interestingly, this may be as simple as inspecting the organizational policies which provide the "rules" for employee absenteeism. In other words, what happens when an individual does not attend work? Recent investigations have strongly concluded that there are major reductions in the rates of absenteeism caused by nothing more than policies followed by the organization. It should be noted that we are not discussing punishment of an employee for being absent, or direct discipline of any kind, but merely the existence of reasonable policies that encourage employees' presence on the job.

One examination, for example, found that:

- Organizations which pay more money to employees have higher absence rates. As income increases, employees may "buy" leisure. Simply, they can afford to be absent.
- Organizations which do not require that an employee establish proof of illness (doctor's certification) have higher rates of employee absenteeism.
- Organizations which allow for higher accumulation of sick leave (1 1/2 per month versus 1/2 a day per month, for instance) have higher rates of employee absenteeism; and,
- Organizations which do not reimburse earned but unused sick leave have higher rates of absenteeism (Dalton & Perry, 1981).

Similar results have been reported elsewhere. The influence of various sick leave policies for teachers was studied to determine their effects on absenteeism. Teachers covered by an income-protection plan (being paid though missing work), for example, were absent more often. It also turns out that teachers were absent less often when they had to provide proof of their illness. Moreover, teachers were absent less often when they had to report their absences to the principal (Winkler, 1980).

Yet another investigation has reported that liberal sick leave policies lead to higher rates of absenteeism (Leigh, 1981). This is consistent with other reports that removing compensation incentives reduces casual absenteeism (Dilts & Deitsch, 1986).

It is notable that none of the examples discussed here accomplished lower levels of employee absenteeism through the use of harsh discipline. In fact, none of them relied on any disciplinary measures.

Rather, these examinations in combination would seem to suggest that organizational absence rates may be highly related to the control policies related to absenteeism. Given that the absence rates are much higher for the more lenient policies, it may be that employees are exploiting these as well as other such provisions. It would appear that organizations which do not require proof of illness and allow high accumulations of sick leave are providing a climate which tends to encourage absenteeism.

Organizations should review their policies, whether formal or informal, with respect to absenteeism, and modify where appropriate those policies which actually encourage

absenteeism. This concept—that the policies of many organization, though not deliberate, seem in practice to accept absenteeism—has been recently referred to as “organizational permissiveness” (Brooke, 1986). This point has been beautifully summarized:

Do firms reward employees for failing to show up for work on a regular basis? As preposterous as this question may appear, recent studies indicate that the compensation programs of some firms encourage and even reward absenteeism. For example, firms whose compensation programs, particularly sick-pay plans, guarantee employees uninterrupted benefits during short periods of absenteeism experience higher rates of absenteeism than do firms that directly tie benefits to hours worked. Stated somewhat differently, absenteeism rates decline where firms condition worker compensation, and continued employment, upon regular attendance. Many firms, therefore, albeit unwittingly and indirectly, not only tolerate or accept but actually reward employee absences (Dilts, Deitsch, & Paul, 1985:28; emphasis added).

### ***Summary of Absence Policy***

It has been strongly suggested, then, that many policies may have the effect of “making absenteeism ‘easier’ or more profitable for the employee, thereby leading to higher absence rates for the organization” (Dalton & Perry, 1981:426).

This simply does not have to be the case. Absenteeism is subject to control and there is very strong evidence that such control can be gained through reasonable policies for employee absence. With such policies, management may have to resort to direct disciplinary action much less frequently.

The several studies reviewed here may in concert provide some guidelines for developing a reasonable set of absence policies. The object is to adopt a set of policies which do not have the effect of rewarding employee absenteeism. Such policies might include the following, either singly or in combination:

- Provide less generous paid sick leave such as 3/4 day per month rather than 1 1/2;
- Allow for higher accumulations of sick leave so that employees do not “lose” their benefits if they do not use them;
- Allow some compensation for employees who have “earned” sick leave but have not used it if they quit, retire, and so forth;
- A “waiting day” policy could be adopted to discourage one-day absences;
- A sick-leave certification policy could be put in place; and,
- Other benefits could be tied to actual hours worked so that employees with more absenteeism would receive proportionately less vacation, retirement, and so forth.

Control through the use of absenteeism policies such as those suggested may be effective in reducing avoidable and chronic absenteeism. However, organizational rules and policies alone are not the complete solution, particularly if an organization has an established work environment in which absenteeism is accepted. Suggestions for the establishment of formal mechanisms must be accompanied by attempts to foster and develop an attendance culture.

## *Toward Less Permissive Absence Culture*

Every organization has sets of values and shared beliefs that guide behavior and dictate norms. These shared expectations tell people how to behave and constitute the culture of an organization. An organizational culture consists of the values, beliefs, norms, and meanings that are shared among employees and are separate from the normal organization rules (Pettigrew, 1979). These informal expectations dictate the actions and reactions of workers within the firm. The cultural rules are "the way we do things around here," and thus constitute learned and taken-for-granted guidelines for behavior (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). As such, organizational culture is a rather loosely defined concept that can include any number of employee values and behaviors.

Organizational culture serves an important function by defining acceptable and unacceptable behavior. More importantly, a culture once established is enduring and stable over time. Newcomers learn what is expected from those already socialized and thus the "rules of the game" are perpetuated over time. This social glue binds employees one to another and is considered a powerful force in organizational functioning.

A strong organizational culture results in productivity and long-term success, allowing a company to "gain as much as two hours of productive work per employee per day" (Deal & Kennedy, 1982:15). These authors are joined by others who advocate the performance potential for firms who develop and define the informal norms, beliefs, and values that members of a company share in common.

What is less frequently noted are the dysfunctions which exist when a strong culture operates in conflict with the formal organizational rules and policies. In this situation, the culture hinders the effectiveness of the firm and may ultimately lead to organizational failure.

Cultures which support or encourage informal behaviors which are not in keeping with organizational rules or needs are viewed as undesirable cultures. A culture that legitimizes and encourages absenteeism is an example of the dark side of organizational culture. In such a firm, solidarity is present, but the shared beliefs encourage voluntary and avoidable absence. This potentially counterproductive set of guiding norms is called an absence culture (Johns & Nicholson, 1982).

In an absence culture the informal rules and shared beliefs support, if not encourage, employees to take days off (Chadwick-Jones et al., 1982; Johns & Nicholson, 1982; Nicholson & Jones, 1985). An absence culture is distinguished from individual absenteeism when the leave-taking is common practice, motivated or planned in advance, and considered legitimate by co-workers (Chadwick-Jones et al., 1982; Dalton & Enz, 1986). In an absence culture the problem of poor attendance is not an individual one, but a social one, because a network exists to support and encourage taking days off. An absence culture exists because the organization has provided an environment that contributes to arbitrary and frequent absenteeism.

An absence culture can prove to be costly drain on the resources of an organization. Costs associated with lost wages and benefits, lost work time, lost production, missed opportunities and deadlines, and, eventually, replacement and training may be attributable to a culture that encourages taking days off. Allen and Higgins (1979) indicate that the cost of an absence culture exceeds \$100 million a year. In addition to measurable costs, there are business losses associated with employees learning bad habits and perpetuating these habits over time.

An organization does not have a single unified culture, and thus the entire company is not likely to be operating in an absence culture. It is more likely that organizations consist of many subcultures that subscribe to unique values and beliefs. One department or subgroup may condone or foster absenteeism while another may impose sanctions for absenteeism. In a setting where the absence of one employee makes the work of another difficult, norms may exist to discourage avoidable absence. In contrast, when the employees in a group historically and repeatedly take days off for leisure activities, norms may exist that encourage such actions.

A recent report indicated that two work groups, identical in their operation and

reward systems, were found to have different attendance rates. Close examination revealed that absence was directly attributable to the group norms. One group's norms—the group's culture—supported coming to work while the other group's norms discouraged attendance (Chadwick-Jones et. al., 1982). While many persist in focusing on individual factors to explain absenteeism, it appears that the work culture dramatically influences leave-taking (Johns & Nicholson, 1982).

### ***Factors Contributing to an Absence Culture***

Several factors contribute to the existence and perpetuation of an absence culture. The society at large plays a critical role in supporting or discouraging an absence culture. Countries such as Japan and Switzerland are known to have low levels of absenteeism, while Italy, France, and Sweden report high levels. In Italy—a society that is permissive about avoidable absence—the problem of attendance has led manufacturers to hire up to 14% more workers than they need (Steers & Rhodes, 1978).

Situational factors in the society can also shape organizational absence cultures. In the United States, during World War II, absenteeism decreased dramatically because it was considered unpatriotic to miss work (Ott, 1981). In contrast, periods of economic prosperity and low unemployment may stimulate greater absenteeism.

Another powerful factor in the development of an absence culture is the views of senior co-workers. When a work group is cohesive and consists of employees with many years of seniority who legitimize absence, a strong set of norms may exist encouraging avoidable leave. A newcomer to the group is often told what is acceptable, and conforms in an effort to be accepted and feel comfortable with the group.

Management contributes to the perpetuation of an absence culture when formal controls are not in place to monitor absenteeism. Supervisors who ignore existing policies tacitly condone leave-taking. If management is lenient or unconcerned with attendance, there are few reasons for employees to care. In the absence of supervisors' actions and formal policies, the work group cultures will prevail. Management's apathy, combined with the lack of formal controls or policies, encourages the perpetuation of inappropriate work group cultures.

Absence cultures flourish when nonwork activities and interests are given greater importance than work responsibilities. Employees who have or are encouraged to develop strong attachments to leisure activities may consciously choose to stay home to enjoy these activities. According to one recent study, the value attached to nonwork activities was related to the duration of absence (Youngblood, 1984).

A final factor influencing a culture of absenteeism is the job itself. Low status dead-ends jobs that lack discretion and variety may increase the desire of employees to stay at home to avoid or escape undesirable tasks (Nicholson & Johns, 1985). Factory operatives, for example, are more likely to be absent than other workers in manufacturing industries (Taylor, 1981). Similarly, persons in interesting, motivating jobs are less likely to be absent (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). It is not difficult to understand how informal rules would legitimize staying home from work in circumstances where the job was unrewarding, tedious, strenuous, or boring.

Societal mores, co-worker expectations, management neglect, extraorganizational interests, and undesirable job requirements all contribute to the perpetuation of an absence culture. Of these factors, all but the norms of society are within the control of management. Hence, management has the potential to monitor, predict, and change the organizational culture. In situations where an undesirable culture is thriving, the task of the human resource manager is to develop a plan for changing the unwanted absence culture and for building a desirable attendance culture in its place.

### ***Changing An Absence Culture***

An absence culture can be changed, but the change requires commitment by management and consistency of administration. Attempts to change a dysfunctional

culture will require time and the use of multiple approaches. To change an absence culture, management actions must be proactive rather than reactive, and comprehensive rather than hit-or-miss.

Turning an absence culture into an attendance culture can be accomplished by focusing on the eight strategies listed in Exhibit 1. This exhibit provides a brief statement of each change strategy and illustrations of how the approach might be used to lessen the influence of an absence culture. Each of the eight strategies will be discussed in turn.

**EXHIBIT 1**  
***Strategies for Turning Absence Cultures Into Attendance Cultures***

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<u>Strategies</u>	<u>Illustrations</u>
Increasing Managerial Attention and Administration of Policies	Better reporting systems. Clarification of expectations. Consistent administration of policies.
Attendance Supporting Rewards	Monetary rewards or stock options for good attendance.
Absence Reducing Sanctions	Docking pay, warnings, discussions. Clarification of disciplinary procedures.
Redesigning Work	Quality circles and participative decision making.
Role Modeling	Peer-based profit sharing for attendance.
Reducing Nonwork Conflicts	In-house child care programs, flexible hours.
Altering Selection and Promotion Criteria	Select and promote persons who hold attendance supporting beliefs. Examine employee attendance reports prior to hiring.
Employee Removal	Terminate serious offenders.

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### ***Increasing Attention to Absenteeism***

One of the most effective ways of reducing an absence culture is to monitor and consistently administer company policies. A survey of approximately 1,000 personnel administrators revealed that consistency in applying attendance policies was the best method of controlling absence (Scott & Markham, 1982).

Many managers ignore or inconsistently apply company policies. If these supervisors paid greater attention to leave-taking behaviors, increased attendance would result. Communicating the importance of attendance and clarifying expectations help employees to recognize the commitment of management to attendance behaviors. By demonstrating supervisory awareness and involvement in reducing absenteeism, and by consistently administering policies, existing norms which legitimate absence can be changed.

### ***Attendance Supporting Rewards***

Absenteeism can often be reduced by the introduction of positive reinforcement programs that reward good attendance (Schmitz & Heneman, 1980). Numerous programs exist for rewarding attendance, including those which use incentives such as awards, promotions, preferred job assignments, year-end bonuses, credit toward retirement, or prizes. While some may question whether it is appropriate to reward someone for coming to work, numerous studies have found these programs to increase attendance (Pedalino & Gamboa, 1974; Stephens & Burroughs, 1978).

The introduction of rewards, however, may be accompanied by some serious problems worth consideration. In particular, the discontinuation of a reward program may result in even higher levels of absenteeism (Stone, 1980). Further, reward programs may lose value over time, pose record-keeping problems, or prove too costly to introduce (Ott, 1981). Clearly the costs must be balanced against the long-run benefits of these reward programs.

### ***Using Sanctions to Reduce Absenteeism***

Another way that managers can change an absence culture is by introducing some form of disciplinary action. The use of sanctions is by far the most frequently used approach to solving absence problems. Warnings, discussions, docked pay, and layoffs are examples of this approach to absenteeism. While sanctions have not been found to work well in groups of occasional absence offenders, they are successful in reducing absenteeism in high absence groups (Stone, 1980).

Combining punishing and rewarding systems of absence control have recently yielded dramatic success. The punishment approach tends to shape the behaviors of employees while the reinforcement approach provides for positive attitudes toward the organization (Kempen & Hall, 1977; Kopelman & Schneller, 1981).

### ***Redesigning Work***

In some work situations, employees develop an absence culture because they are sick of the work. When jobs are monotonous, one viable approach to changing the culture is to redesign or enrich the job.

The introduction of participative decision making or quality of working life activities are examples of programs designed to improve the level of voluntary involvement on the part of employees. Quality of work programs typically allow employees to meet in groups to discuss and solve work-related problems. Participating in work planning and other work team activities is a critical component for enhancing work involvement, heightening the degree of reliance co-workers have on each other, and improving attendance. In a recent study, participants in a quality circle were found to have lower rates of absenteeism than similar workers who did not participate in the program (Marks, Marvis, Hackett, & Grady; 1986).

### ***Role Modeling***

If an organization wants and expects employees to attend, management must

exhibit good attendance behaviors. To alter the existing norms which favor absence, management has the task of serving as a role model.

Co-workers behavior is perhaps the most powerful shaper of work group cultures. Dysfunctional work group norms are a primary factor in fostering an absence culture; thus role modeling of attendance behavior at the co-worker level can be a very powerful approach to encouraging attendance. Breaking up cohesive but counterproductive work groups may be a first step in developing functional norms. Developing peer support for attendance may be a second step in encouraging co-worker support. General Motors has found that the use of a peer-based profit sharing program is an excellent way of pressuring frequent offenders into changing their behaviors (Deitsch & Dilts, 1981).

### ***Reducing Nonwork Conflicts***

Employees may find absenteeism the only solution when faced with nonwork problems such as inadequate child care or multiple demands on their time. The problems of family obligations are particularly acute for working women with children. Two ways of resolving these nonwork conflicts are company-sponsored child care centers and flexible hours.

Recent surveys have revealed that company-sponsored child care programs have increased over 400% between 1978 and 1982 (Fenn, 1985). Numerous companies have reported substantial drops in absenteeism after initiating child care programs, with the added benefits of improved morale and easier recruitment. Flexible time has also been found to reduce absenteeism. According to one study, married women and mothers had the lowest rates of absenteeism when a flexible work schedule was introduced (Krausz & Freiback, 1983). The introduction of programs designed to reduce the conflict between work and family obligations appears to elicit organizational commitment and reduce the acceptability of perpetuating an absence culture.

### ***Altering Selection and Promotion Criteria***

One of the easiest ways of solving an absenteeism problem is by hiring persons who believe that attendance is important. Promoting such workers insures that an attendance culture is perpetuated over time and that newcomers are carefully socialized. Ascertaining whether a potential employee possesses positive attitudes toward attendance is not easy to do. However, if such attitudes can be discovered by examining past employment attendance records, promotion decisions become easier.

### ***Employee Removal***

Finally, in those extreme situations where a serious offender or group of offenders can be isolated, removal of the workers may be *the* most prudent course of action. Termination of an employee sends a strong message to others and may over time break up groups of people who share the informal norms which encourage avoidable time off.

## ***Summary***

Long-term development of attendance behavior is possible by carefully planning organizational policies and utilizing the eight strategies for changing an absence culture. In some situations specific strategies will be more feasible or successful, but generally it is best to use more than one approach.

Change will not happen overnight. Cultures are slow to form and even slower to alter. In addition, change can only hope to succeed under circumstances where management is committed to taking action and employees are encouraged to becoming involved in the planning and implementation of new absenteeism programs.

A key objective, then, is to establish formal policies which actually discourage—or at least do not encourage—absenteeism. To the extent to which management provides an effective environment, by establishing and implementing reasonable absenteeism policies in concert with positive changes in absence cultures, lower levels of employee absenteeism can be the result.

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