

Tips for Supervisors: Managing Your Employee's Health-Related Employment Disruption

Here are 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. We based these tips 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. This will help your employee recover quickly, get your workplace back to normal and avoid needless benefit outlays.

Quick management tips

1. Immediately and visibly take charge.
2. Realize you are setting the tone.
3. Practice the golden rule from the start.
4. Reach out to BWC and your MCO for assistance.
5. Expect the employee to recover while on the job.
6. Aim for a win-win.
7. Look for easy ways to adjust work temporarily.
8. Deal with potential ADA issues.
9. If work caused the problem, do something about it.
10. Let your MCO help smooth the medical care process.
11. Maintain routine and order.
12. Stay in touch with an employee who is not working.
13. Show your loyalty to strengthen their dedication.

1. Immediately and visibly take charge

Time is of the essence! As soon as you learn of an injury, make a quick assessment. Be aware: The whole work group is watching you. Your reaction will show them how you would treat them if they were injured. So take visible and appropriate action. Be kind as well as firm. Employees need reassurance to whether you'll stand by them when they're hurt. When you make it clear that you intend to do what's right and stay on top of the situation, everyone else will see that they're supposed to do that, too.

2. Realize you are setting the tone

The way you talk to this employee is important. Your words will get the situation off on the right or the wrong track. As a manager, your personal feelings about this person or event is irrelevant. The injured employee needs to see that you care about his or her well-being. Do not joke or make inappropriate comments. Even if you're upset, remember: Be polite, stick to the facts and follow company policy.

3. Practice the golden rule from the start

You can find a way to handle this situation that actively supports the person standing before you – and your company. Respond to the employee 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 BWC and your MCO for assistance

When an episode begins, get your managed care organization (MCO) or BWC involved right away. They may be able to help you explore remain-at-work options and coordinate return-to-work plans. BWC offers free on-site injury-prevention consultative services that can give you pointers on modifying work stations and re-designing processes. These changes can prevent additional problems and help facilitate a safe early return-to-work.

5. Expect the employee to recover while on the job

From the start, make it clear that you are still counting on the employee as a valuable contributor to the company during his or her recuperation. Tell the employee to ask his or her doctor for an activity prescription that describes what he or she can safely

do at work and at home while recovering. Have the employee give you a copy of the form. Work together with the employee to find something productive for him or her to do as soon as he or she is up and around and can get out of the house.

6. Aim for a win-win

People recover faster if they stay active and keep busy. Sitting at home can make people worry they're too disabled to work, or they're no longer valuable to the company. Keeping people at work means your company allows them to contribute something instead of paying them for sitting home and doing nothing. It also helps your company control its benefits costs.

7. Look for easy ways to adjust work temporarily

Some ideas include: (A) having employee do his or her regular job but re-arranging the person's work station or assigning someone else to do the tasks 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.

8. Deal with potential ADA issues

The Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) applies to most Ohio employers. If an employee with a workers' compensation injury meets the broad definition of a qualified person with a disability under the ADAAA, you may be obligated to make a reasonable accommodation to enable him or her to work and stay employed. Get your human resources department involved whenever an employee is given long-term restrictions (>90 days).

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

If the employee says work caused the problem or made it worse, 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. If you need assistance in resolving the problem, BWC offers free on-site injury-prevention consultative services that you can access via our website at ohiobwc.com.

10. Let your MCO help smooth the medical care process

The injured person will probably appreciate your help getting to a doctor. Your MCO can suggest a nearby medical facility that can see your employee promptly. The injured person's supervisor or another manager should drive the employee to the medical facility. If the injury is serious, call the employee's family right away so they can come in to provide support.

11. Maintain routine and order

Remain the manager of the person with the medical condition. Tell the employee his or her assignment is to get better and to contribute what he or she can while recuperating. If performance issues exist, make sure to keep them separate from the work-related injury. Seek input from your HR department as well as your BWC claims representative. Then develop a plan for how to handle both issues.

12. 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 that you miss him or her, and you look forward to his or her return. Don't ask about the medical condition. Instead, ask the employee if he or she has questions. Then really listen to the employee's concerns, and get him or her the answers. The employee should feel good about your call.

13. Show your loyalty to strengthen their dedication

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; and (C) having someone offer a helping hand. Gratitude for the company's kindness will naturally make the employee want to repay you – by coming to work.

For additional information, log on to ohiobwc.com.