



“Ask Dr. J”



The “Ask Dr. J” columns are authored monthly by Jennifer Christian, MD, MPH, President of Webility Corporation. See previous columns at www.webility.md.

Dr. J's columns also appear in the monthly Bulletin of the Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC). To purchase a book of Dr. J's collected columns, go to www.dmec.org.

The columns often summarize issues discussed by the Work Fitness and Disability Roundtable, a free, multi-disciplinary e-mail discussion group moderated by Dr. Christian. Apply to join the Roundtable at www.webility.md.

January 2005 – Dealing with Resistance to RTW

Dear Dr. J:

Have you got any ideas on how to handle employees who keep finding reasons and ways to resist going back to work? When I'm negotiating transitional return-to-work plans, I often feel like I'm pushing a rope up a hill. And while you're at it, how I can deal more effectively with supervisors who resist taking people back on transitional work?

Patty in Portland

Dear Patty:

The fact that return-to-work is a “people process” sometimes gets lost in the search for information about medical restrictions and job descriptions. And yet, let's remember that “where there is a will, there is a way”. I bet you don't have much trouble arranging transitional work when both the employee and the employer want to make it happen. As a matter of fact, you may never even become aware of the situation, and they simply arrange the “light duty” privately between themselves. Some years ago, when I was a corporate medical director and the overseer of a new alternate duty program, the senior vice president of operations told me that the only cases that ever got to the medical department were the ones where there was trouble between the worker and the supervisor – otherwise they simply figured out how to handle it together. So, my first suggestion is to think of resistance as a sign that there are issues below the surface that need attention.

I have two tools to offer you – a pair of questions that reduce resistance. Try them, and let me know how well they work for you.

Ask the reluctant employee: “What would make you feel supported, and willing to make the effort to [stay at or] return to work?”

Ask the reluctant supervisor: “What would make you feel supported, and willing to make the effort to let [employee name] come back to work?”

The point is to communicate that you are genuinely interested in their point of view, and also to communicate that you know they are not actively cooperating now. Don't phrase it this way: "What do I have to do to make you feel supported" – because you may get sucker punched. It's important to know what THEY need, and it's not about what YOU have to do. Once they tell you what they need, you get to decide what to do about it.

Be prepared for things like this from the worker: "I need Jack to say he's sorry I got hurt", "I need my supervisor to stop my co-workers from making fun of me", "I need to know they've done something with that stuff on the stairs so I won't get hurt again", "I need a ride to work".

Be prepared for this from the reluctant supervisor: "I need to know he's going to make a good faith effort", "I need help finding stuff for her to do", "I don't know what to do if he says his back starts hurting", "I don't want to take a hit on my budget for this", "I need personnel to back me up on this discipline issue".

These questions work like a charm to drain either angry or passive resistance out of people as long as you communicate a genuine interest and willingness to help. However, be prepared to win some and lose some. If the reluctant worker says: "I need a mink toilet seat and a chauffeured Rolls Royce to pick me up every morning", or the reluctant supervisor says, "We made a decision long ago never to let this guy darken our door again because he's a criminal", you KNOW you're in trouble and I suggest you move onto the next case where your efforts will pay off better.

So, practice using these "resistance reducers", and let me know what happens, OK?

Smiling,
Dr. J