



“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.

February 2006 – Firm But Not Hostile; Kind But Not a Sucker

Dear Dr. J:

A lot of our employees don't like their jobs, and it seems like most of the ones who get injured try to milk the system. We fight that as hard as we can, but it seems like a losing battle. Generous statutory benefits, longstanding company policies, union rules, and our near-total lack of ability to control the claim management process (it is outsourced by statute) tip the odds in the employee's favor. Our comp costs are a shameful secret, and our absenteeism and disability leaves are also really high. Any suggestions on what we can do?

Philippa in Philadelphia

Dear Philippa:

Your situation sounds frustrating and unfortunately, it also sounds similar to the situation facing a lot of older American companies now seriously challenged by the need to reduce overhead and increase workforce availability and productivity in order to survive in competitive global markets.

The most fundamental suggestion I have comes straight from my grandmother: Remember, “you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” It's time to stop complaining about the ground rules under which you are forced to operate, to remember what really makes human beings tick, and then figure out how to win the game you are actually playing instead of the one you wish you were.

Not just in your system, but in ALL disability programs, the person with the most power to determine the outcome is the employee, who decides how much effort to put into getting well and staying at or returning to work. The second most powerful is the employee's supervisor, who decides how to manage the situation – actively, passively, hostilely, kindly, etc.

Ironically, both of those parties often see themselves as powerless pawns in a “system;” but when an employee and supervisor agree what to do, other people (like me and you) never even get involved! A senior vice president of operations once told me that the only cases that come to the attention of “medical” or “benefits” are the ones where there is trouble between worker and supervisor – otherwise they just work it out between themselves

If you accept for a moment the idea that your employees play the most powerful role, and that your line managers play the second most powerful role, a question arises: What would your managers have to do to harness the energy the employees are now devoting to avoiding work, and re-channel that energy in the direction you want – towards staying at work or getting back there as soon as possible? How would your managers have to see their role in the matter? What environment would they need to create for the employee?

To me, the silliest role for an employer to play is the “Hostile Sucker,” and yet this is quite common. In Hostile Sucker companies, the management group and benefits staff has become so cynical and resigned that all workers who become injured or ill are treated almost like criminals. When an average or even a good employee goes out on comp, the company reacts as though it has been betrayed. – and the employee is treated with suspicion, emotionally abandoned, ostracized or ridiculed, and gossiped about, no matter the real situation. This is hostile.

Yet, many of these employers become hostile because they don’t want to acknowledge that they have actually become suckers. Hostile Sucker employers have adopted such lax policies and lavish benefit programs that now they feel powerless to control their own employees. They fail to set expectations and limits that effectively manage the situation when workers become injured or ill. The original business purpose of the relationship between employer and worker is almost forgotten amidst all the conversation about benefits, policies, rules and rights. I call it the “fair 8 for 8” (or eight hours pay for eight hours of work). The longer way of saying it is: “We hired you because we have work that needs doing, and we expect you to make a contribution to the organization commensurate with the wages/salary we pay you.”

Hostile Sucker employers have no vision for what they do want to happen when employees become ill or hurt – they only know what they don’t want. In these organizations, the response to injury or illness in an employee is usually reactive rather than proactive. Communications between the company and ill / injured worker are missing, inauthentic, impersonal, or downright angry and accusatory. A few workers may be treated well, but these are the ones who are favorites or have been otherwise deemed to “deserve” it. Oftentimes, Hostile Sucker employers have created a generally unpleasant workplace culture, and it extends to the workers’ comp and disability programs, too. Many employees are more able to cope with a tough workplace when they feel OK, than they are when they are feeling sick, weak, vulnerable or unsure of themselves.

Taking a no-nonsense approach and being firm and fair is not being hostile. Being kind and considerate is not the same as being a sucker. And yet people confuse the two, especially at work. Here’s a brief list of the differences, as I see it.

When You're Doing This:	You're Being:
Enforcing policies and following procedures consistently. Enforcing work rules and behavior expectations for workers on modified duty.	Fair & Firm
Expecting people to deliver whatever productive capacity they have during recovery, as long as it is medically safe for them to do so.	Fair & Firm
Treating a person who is ill or injured with disrespect, as though he/she is a cheater, goldbricker, benefit abuser, etc.	Hostile
Allow co-workers or line supervisors to ostracize, belittle, tease, or undermine someone who is working modified duty due to medical restrictions; ordering someone to work beyond his/her limitations.	Hostile
Practicing common courtesies: saying you're sorry when someone has been injured at work; exhibiting concern for the sick or injured person's situation, keeping in touch; being curious about what concerns they might have; making sure they are getting their questions answered and reasonable needs met.	Kind & Considerate
Insisting that people who are making an effort to recover on-the-job are treated with respect and courtesy; and giving them an ombudsmen or advocate to go to for support	Kind & Considerate
Paying people to sit home when there is something productive they could be doing for the organization	A Sucker
Failing to confront, counsel, and discipline workers when they are demonstrating a pattern of poor attendance, attitude and performance.	A Sucker

In my experience, the worst programs (highest absenteeism rates and disability and workers' compensation costs) are often found in companies that do not manage their business as though they are aiming at excellence in any domain -- not even their core business. Unfortunately, they do not see their predicament and poor performance as their own making. They blame it on the workforce, the union, their competitors, vendors, customers, lawyers, state laws, Uncle Sam, whoever. Sound familiar? If that's your situation, then I'm not sure how much help I can be until your management wakes up.

However, some companies that have poor programs now do have the potential for rapid and major improvement. These companies are often high-performing in some areas of their business with a strong drive for achievement and a tightly-managed approach that produces positive results – in those areas that do receive creative and constructive management attention. In short, they know what “good” looks like and how to produce it. At present, the top

management is probably tolerating poor attendance and high workers' comp and disability program costs due to simple ignorance or neglect because it looks like a "benefits administration" issue that the HR or risk management department should be handling. Top management may simply not recognize that their company's poor level of workforce availability is a blinking red indicator that the workforce is demoralized or disenfranchised and the management cadre feels powerless and ill-prepared to manage ill and injured employees in the workplace. Change starts to happen once top management realizes that something better is possible, and decides to apply basic good business management principles to this area to make that better future a reality. Once they do "get in gear," they're in a great position to do better.

So, Philippa, I hope your company has top management that knows what "good" looks like, and that you can connect the dots for them between poor workforce availability and your company's culture in this arena. Remember to show them how they stack up against their competition. Many a miracle turnaround has begun when ambitious people see what the "other guy" has accomplished.

Smiling,
Dr. J

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