

# **THE ABSENCE MANAGEMENT POCKETBOOK**

By Max A. Eggert

*Drawings by Phil Hailstone*

“A very practical book that provides a simple and pragmatic approach to assist managers in their understanding of how to manage absenteeism. A comprehensive insight into the causes of absenteeism and how to manage this complex issue.”

**Bob Behnke, HR Business Partner, Marketing, Caltex Australia**

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## THE METHODS

# INTRODUCTION



Set out in this section are 60 practical suggestions you can follow to help reduce absenteeism.

They are divided into groups as follows:

● Management Preliminaries	Tips	1 – 5
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## THE METHODS

# MANAGEMENT PRELIMINARIES



**Have an absence policy**

**Set an absence objective**

**Train your management**

**Train your supervision**

**Get union support**

### **1: Have an absence policy**

This need not be complex but needs to be stated and communicated to employees, especially when they begin their employment. All you need is a simple and straightforward statement, along the lines of:

'It is the policy of the Company that everyone should fulfil their contractual hours and only be absent from work when they are ill, when they are under significant domestic difficulty or for some other good reason. Casual absence by anyone is not acceptable.'

## THE METHODS

# MANAGEMENT PRELIMINARIES



### 2: Set a total absence objective of 3.5%

Specific objectives are much better than woolly statements such as 'keeping absence down to a minimum'. They give everyone a standard to work towards.

Of course people are going to be off work – they get sick, have toothache, have domestic crises but, as a benchmark, 3.5% is about as good as you can reasonably expect.



## THE METHODS

# MANAGEMENT PRELIMINARIES



### 3: Train your management in the cost of absenteeism

It is surprising that line managers, while often aware of the costs of poor quality, waste, etc, are frequently ignorant of the costs of absenteeism.

If managers know how much things cost, and are held accountable for that cost then this encourages appropriate management action.



## THE METHODS

# MANAGEMENT PRELIMINARIES



### **4: Train your supervision and first line management in absence control management**

First line managers and supervisors are the key to absence control. Not only do they need to know the absence policy but also they must own it. They are the ones who will operate the control procedures; they must be confident in doing so. Successful schemes are dependent on recording and counselling systems, which must be carried out efficiently and with empathy.

Employees who take advantage of the system will eventually fall foul of the disciplinary procedure and, worst case scenario, it will be line management and supervision who will have to convince the industrial tribunal that they behaved reasonably and fairly in all the circumstances. This will require training.

## THE METHODS

# MANAGEMENT PRELIMINARIES



### **5: Have an absence agreement as part of your work practices with the trade union**

Reductions in absence will certainly increase profitability, part of which can be given back to employees in improved remuneration.

Also, as you begin to move into the disciplinary procedure with those who continually take unauthorised absence, the process will be easier if you have an agreement with your trade union. It would be a very rare shop steward who would publicly assist management in a member's dismissal, but informally they can do great work explaining to their members the agreed position.

Shop stewards, as well as first line managers, get badgered by employees who are fed up with those who take advantage of the system and let their colleagues down or, through their absence, create extra work for those who are more honest.

## THE METHODS

# PREPARATORY TRAINING



**Counselling  
training**

**Disciplinary  
training**

**Induction  
training**

### **6: Train your managers in counselling skills**

Most unexpected employee absence is for good reasons rather than *lead-swinging*. First line managers need to be empathetic to the needs of their employees who are going to need help or advice, or both. Employees will prefer to unburden themselves to someone they know and respect. This is more likely to be their manager than someone in HR whom they only see occasionally. Not all managers can become counsellors overnight, but they could and should be the first port of call for an employee whenever possible.

If managers are going to confront the absenteeism of their employees, they need to show genuine concern, since most absence, as we have said, will be genuine. It is unreasonable to expect line management to participate actively in the absence control process unless they have been trained in the essential skills.

## THE METHODS

# PREPARATORY TRAINING



### **6: Train your managers in counselling skills (cont'd)**

Line managers and supervisors with some training in counselling skills are more likely to spot problems that affect employees' overall health and well-being. It is important that they are alert not just to sickness issues but to what makes a healthy workplace.

Early detection of drink, drug or mental health problems should be followed up with access to doctors/occupational health advisers (see section on health matters).

Managers are responsible for a safe working environment, free from potential unsafe working practices which could lead to accidents, or possible issues of harassment or bullying. Stress and depression are the likely consequences of any such incidents if they are not treated seriously.

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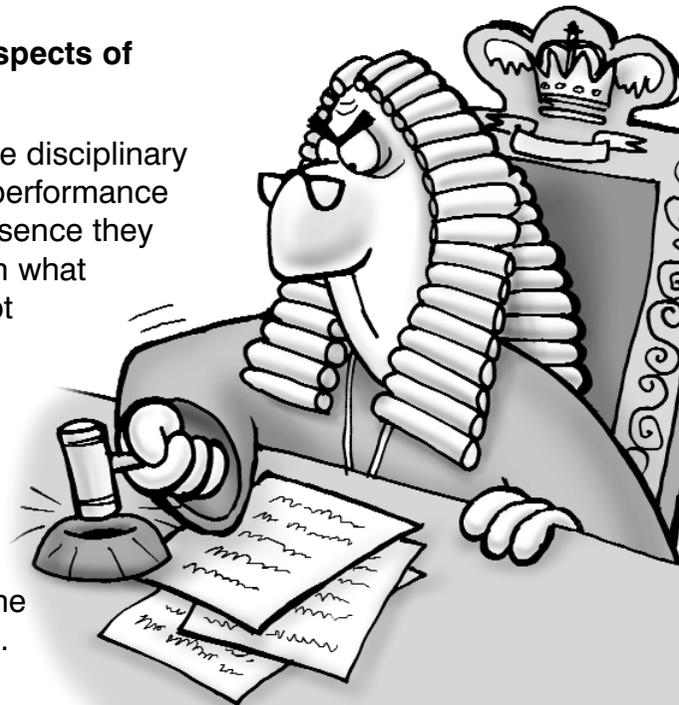
# PREPARATORY TRAINING



### 7: Train your managers in the disciplinary aspects of absence

Most managers are confident when applying the disciplinary procedure to misconduct items, such as poor performance or safety issues. However, when it comes to absence they feel less certain. They need to be taken through what they can and cannot do, what is and what is not reasonable, and of course the necessary paperwork.

It must always be remembered that dismissed employees have the absolute right to test management's decision in an industrial tribunal. It saps management's confidence if they lose for procedural reasons, when someone really has been taking advantage of the system.



## THE METHODS

# PREPARATORY TRAINING



### **8: Communicate the company attendance policy during induction**

Make sure that each new employee understands and agrees to the attendance policy and knows that casual absence will attract the disciplinary procedure. All new employees, unless they are told, will expect the organisation to have the same attitude towards absence as their previous employer.

You need to ensure that the standard you expect is communicated at the start of employment, **not** when the employee starts to take time off because he or she was under the impression that it was acceptable to do so.

Without an absence policy it is reasonable for an employee who wants to take time off to test the system to see what is possible.

## THE METHODS

# PREPARATORY TRAINING



**9: During induction, when advising employees of the disciplinary and appeals procedure, draw their attention especially to the absence provision in the misconduct section**

Employees, unless they are fresh from school or college, will have worked under the disciplinary procedure of other firms which might not have taken absence so seriously.

By using your policy as an example, you ensure that the full attendance requirement is made clear. This is also helpful when the first discussion occurs with an employee suspected of casual absence. The discussion can make reference to this training.

## About the Author

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Max is an international management psychologist who specialises in assisting organisations and individuals to achieve their best. He works mainly in the UK and Australia. A respected authority on the human and organisational aspects of change and empowerment, Max has delivered workshops and seminars to thousands of executives and managers throughout the world.

Other books by Max include:

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