Psychologist Insight - Number 5

Taking fake sick days

How many times have managers questioned their staff after one or more of them have taken apparent fake sick days? Too often, many managers will tell you.

Although impossible to quantify, it is estimated that on average staff in the UK take between 5 and 6 days a year off for a "sickie". That is, they fail to come in to work when they could easily have done so, blaming an unexplained "tummy bug", a "bad headache" or "24 hour flu". Clearly some staff do suffer genuine sickness, and indeed some insist on coming in to work when they should in fact stay at home and take the time to recuperate.

There are typical days for taking sickies, such as Fridays or Mondays, and there are some jobs, those that are either very boring or very stressful, where uncertificated short-term sickness is quite common.

Yet do managers and bosses carry some responsibility for their staff taking "sickies"? Our research at Good Boss suggests that they do!

As part of our research we asked over 200 staff whether they had, or had thought about, taking a fake sick day off. We then linked this to aspects of their boss's behaviour using items taken from the Good Boss Questionnaire. Although the majority of boss behaviours did not have a statistically significant link to their staff taking fake sick days, a key minority did.

For instance bosses who "waste (others) time" and "cause chaos and confusion" increased the likelihood that their staff would take fake sick days. Other factors included the unpredictability of bosses, for instance "has noticeable mood swings" and "keeps changing their minds". It seems that staff may well be more reluctant to come into work if they feel that their managers are themselves incompetent and unproductive. Other more personal behaviours also contributed such as "takes credit for the work of others", "humiliates others" and "intimidates others to get results".

So what can bosses do to reduce the likelihood of their staff taking fake sick days? Well being better organised and more considerate helps, such as "makes effective use of time", "is reasonable in their requests" and "balances task needs and people needs". On the interpersonal front the behaviours that seem to matter include "treats others with respect", "puts the team first" and "rewards good work".

So the next time you suspect a member of your staff has taken a fake sick day, ask yourself what did you do which could have contributed to that outcome?

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