How to help employees return from sick leave

Transitioning back into the workplace after an extended medical leave can be tough for even the most seasoned professionals. The leave of absence is not something employees plan for or desire, it is a medical necessity. They may wonder how their return will be received by others, and may also feel overwhelmed, out of touch and nervous about getting back to work.

Six steps to ease the transition back to work

Stay connected with employees on medical leave
If you have permission to do so, touch base with employees even before they return. Checking in to see how they are doing sends an important message that you care, and gives you an opportunity to keep them in the loop about what is going on at work. Continuing to communicate with employees while they are away lets them know they are missed and gives them a sense of connection and belonging to the organization.

Work closely with the Disability Case Manager
The Disability Case Manager will provide you with invaluable support during an employee leave. They will keep you abreast of significant changes in case status and encourage the employee to adhere to treatment to facilitate a timely return to work. Case Managers build a case management plan, and will also assist with:

- Accommodation options based on employee restrictions and limitations
- Establishing a modified return to work plan based on available accommodation
- Return to work facilitation meeting(s)

Create a transition plan
Once a return date is selected, get started on a transition plan to help ease the employee back to work. Then, communicate this plan to your other employees. Based on information provided by the Case Manager, your plan should account for:

- How much of the original job the employee can take on
- What workstation modifications are needed and possible
- How the workload will be redistributed among the team
- What other special accommodations may be required

After the employee has returned to work, you may need to reassess the transition plan, if it is proving to be too much or too little for him or her.

Welcome the employee back to work
A bouquet of flowers on his or her desk, lunch out with the team or even a simple card sends the message that you and the team are happy to have the employee back. Be kind, considerate and supportive. Although a time for celebration, it is important to keep the employee's privacy and comfort level top of mind. Keep it simple; ask the employee directly what would make him or her most comfortable upon returning to work. Check in with your employee regularly, especially during the first few weeks, to ensure that his or her needs are being met.

Be flexible with your transition plan
Even though employees may be back to work and contributing to the team, there may still be restrictions to what they can do or how long they can work. Understand that it is quite possible that they may require time away from work to attend doctors' appointments. Additionally, what you expect from them and what they are able to contribute may not correlate, so be sure to reconcile this early on with a modified transition plan.

Encourage team work
It is important to understand that employees who return from an extended medical leave will need time to get back into the full swing of things. During this time, it is critical that the team continues to step up and help out where they can. Let your team know you appreciate and recognize their efforts to work together and succeed as a team. Team lunches or tokens of appreciation send the message that you know they are going above and beyond their call of duty.

Welcoming back a team member from medical leave is something to celebrate. Not only do you regain a team member, but your employee achieves an important medical milestone and is well enough to work again. By working together, maintaining the lines of communication and adjusting expectations to a manageable level, the transition back to work will be a success for the employee, the team and the organization.