Understanding absence

Absences are commonly called sick days, but not all sick days are caused by illness. Frequent absences can have a big impact on both your role as well as your company's bottom line. Some of the setbacks include increased costs due to lost productivity, lost revenue and hiring replacement workers. What's more, since sick days are unplanned they can disrupt work flow or increase workloads on other employees.

There are many reasons why your employee might call in sick. Knowing what to expect and how to handle each problem fairly will put you in a place of control and respect. It's therefore important for you to understand the key types of absences:

- **Incidental absences —** absences that are casual and non-patterned. The cause for concern is low with this type of absence. An example of incidental absence is when your employee catches a cold and calls in sick.

- **Intermittent absences —** these absences are more common and reoccurring.

Intermittent absences might lead to more absences or a stressed-out employee so it's good for you know how to spot early warning signs.

- **Patterned absences** — patterned absences might mean the employee faces a barrier or conflict that prevents him or her from coming to work on scheduled days. This type of absence is repetitive, sometimes on the same day of the week or month. For example, an employee with a medical condition might be absent once a month to receive treatment. Patterned absences are sometimes the trickiest to manage because every employee has a right to his or her privacy. However, if you aren't prepared to manage patterned absences, they can potentially lead to increased absences, decreased productivity, or even short and long term disability.

Preventing Absence

An ounce of prevention is worth a happy and productive team of employees! Show an active concern for the health and well-being of your employees; your efforts will instill a relationship of trust and respect in the workplace. You can help your staff and prevent absences by offering appropriate support when you notice signs of concern.

Examples of issues that may lead to absences:

- **Mental Health** — employee(s) might display patterns of behaviour that are out of his or her usual routines. He or she might start showing up late for work, shouting or crying at work, or seem withdrawn from others. These are signs that he or she may need social support or recovery interventions, like the Employee Assistance Plan.

- **Cardiovascular (related to the heart)** — warning signs include shortness of breath, flushed face, nausea, dizziness, and pain or numbness in the arm, neck, jaw, or back. You can encourage better health by pointing out exercise and/or nutrition resources that may be available.

- **Musculoskeletal (related to muscles and bones)** — employee(s) might walk with hand on lower back, crack their joints, complain about their workstation, or talk about body aches and pains. One option to explore is ergonomic assessments in the workplace.

- **Workplace issues** — in some cases, the workplace can be a source of stress and unhappiness. Workplace issues might stem from personality clashes, gossip, pressure to succeed/fear of failure, or a sense of unfair treatment. Your employee is most valuable to you when he or she feels happy and engaged at work. Make it easy for your staff to come to you with their problems. You can improve workplace morale by organizing team potluck lunches and finding other ways to build team spirit.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact LifeWorks·fgi to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.