How to manage serious illness in the workplace

When employees are diagnosed with a serious medical condition, it can affect them on both a personal and professional level. If the diagnosis is recent, they may be reeling from the news and learning how to cope with the reality of their illness. If the condition is ongoing, they may still be struggling to meet the daily demands of the job.

Top tips to minimize the impact of serious illness in the workplace

Educate yourself on the illness
Employee health is a private and confidential matter. If your employee chooses to share information on his/her medical condition with you voluntarily, be sure to keep this information confidential. If able, learn more about your employee's illness. The information can provide you with important insight on how they may be feeling and how to better accommodate their needs. Once you understand the condition and how it impacts those who are affected by it, you will likely feel more compassionate and empathetic to any specific job modification requirements.

Accommodate the affected individual's needs
Employers have a duty to accommodate employees who have limitations due to a health condition. This could include modifications to:

- Job description
- Workstation modifications
- Work requirements or restrictions as defined by the employee's health professional

You may also wish to discuss the situation with your human resources department to ensure you're respecting the employment standards in your province or state.

Be compassionate to employees with a serious medical condition
Whenever you feel frustrated by the situation, remember that employees do not choose to have a condition. Chances are they are simply trying to make the best of it, and are eager to continue to do a good job, even if the parameters of performance have changed. If able, check in with them from time-to-time to see how they are doing, both emotionally and physically, and show them that you care about their well-being.

Offer challenging and rewarding assignments
Even if the employee's job duties have changed, you can still offer them challenging and rewarding assignments or tasks. Give them the opportunity to impress you and to make a meaningful contribution to the team. It will be good for morale and shows the team that the individual still has a lot to offer the group, despite his or her health challenges.

Maintain communication within the team
Team members may not fully understand the situation. When that happens, resentment or frustration can surface that can drive a wedge between co-workers. While it is important to maintain communication within the team, remember that employee health is a private and confidential matter. Focus on team objectives and goals, and provide timely and clear communication to team members on changes in workload and/or responsibilities, so that team members can successfully adapt to new demands.

Be a leader
As a manager, it's important that you demonstrate leadership to your team and lead by example. Your team should understand:

- Like all unexpected and expected absences (e.g., vacation or sick days) the team pulls together to ensure work is completed
- Discrimination or harassment will not be tolerated
- All colleagues deserve privacy and fair treatment
- Questions should be directed to the manager

When illness strikes a member of your team, it is important to be human first and to offer your support. While it is your job to make sure that your team is performing, it is also critical that you step away from business as usual to respect and accommodate your employee's condition. By being understanding and working with the employee to find appropriate and challenging work, you give them the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to the team.