

# Training 101

## C U R E S   F O R   S U P E R V I S O R Y   H E A D A C H E S

**E**ven the most mundane employee problem can turn into a real headache for a supervisor—especially an inexperienced supervisor.

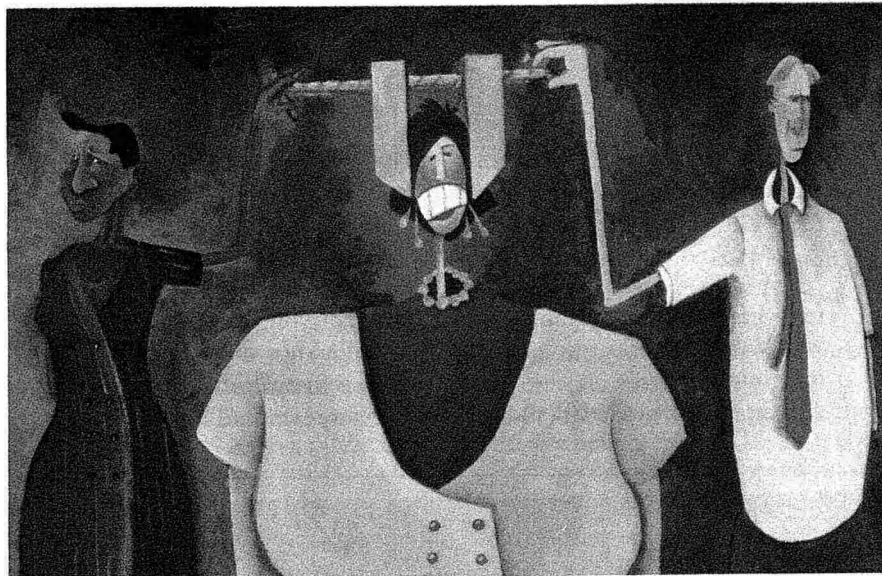
Excessive employee absenteeism is one such headache. And the problem is complicated when the employee in question is a top performer in many other respects. How do you cure excessive absenteeism in an employee you'd rather not fire?

In the first article, authors Cynthia Thompson, Richard Kopelman, and Joseph Siano propose a remedy. They present a case study of a large public transportation agency, focusing on two high-performing employees with high absenteeism rates. The story is true, but the names have been changed.

The second article looks at another headache for new supervisors—appraising employee performance. Robert Cyr describes a basic, seven-step process for writing insightful, helpful comments on performance appraisal sheets, and then goes on to describe a process for training supervisors to use the seven steps.

### **“Buddying Up” for Fewer Sick Days**

**A**fter only a few years of employment at South Eastern Rapid Transit Agency, or SERTA, Bob Farley had worked his way up from messenger to “whiz kid” computer programmer. In the eyes of his boss, Carla Martinez, Bob was a valuable contributor, someone who could make complicated computer programs user-friendly. His knowledge of computer hardware and software was self-taught, making his achievements all the more impressive.



Suzanne Long

Bob was congenial and well-liked by his co-workers, but showing up for work consistently was not one of his virtues. His propensity to party on the weekends—along with his family responsibilities—meant that he often missed work on Mondays—and other days.

A wordprocessor in Carla's department, Jane Waterman, was also an excellent employee except for many absences. A proficient typist, she was the resident expert on the agency's wordprocessing system. A single parent, Jane reportedly missed work often to care for her two children when they were sick. But her co-workers intimated that Jane's absences may have been partly due to her staying up late and socializing on work nights.

**Analyzing the problem.** Two factors might explain Bob's and Jane's high absenteeism rates. First, because of dissatisfaction with their jobs or some facet of their jobs (such as pay or co-workers), the employees may have been using absenteeism as a

*Here are some surprisingly simple remedies for two supervisory headaches—employee absences and performance reviews.*

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temporary escape. Second, personal interests or family responsibilities may have been taking precedence over Bob's and Jane's jobs.

Whatever the reasons, it was clear that Bob and Jane were valued employees. Firing them would not have been the best solution.

Many organizations have implemented punishment-based absence-control systems. Many of those systems have been ineffective. For example, one firm's new disciplinary system required a physician's note for each absence; supervisors issued a series of oral and written warnings for excessive absences. Under the new system, absenteeism actually went up. Total time out of the office increased as short, undocumented absences expanded into longer, documented absences.

Unfortunately for supervisor Carla Martinez, the discipline-oriented system at SERTA was also ineffective in controlling absenteeism. Employees were not paid for days on which they were absent, but their managers rarely issued formal reprimands; when they did, the reprimands were likely to be ineffective.

SERTA's leave policy permitted

five one-day absences without a doctor's note, and up to 12 days with a doctor's note. After six days of undocumented sick leave, an employee was designated "habitually sick." Each subsequent period of sick leave had to be accompanied by a doctor's note.

SERTA imposed no direct penalties for excessive absenteeism or unscheduled leave, though the company did warn employees that they could be brought up on charges or blocked from promotion. Because the company rarely imposed those penalties, managers tended to be lax about absences. A manager who tried to follow the policy could be accused of selective enforcement—discrimination.

**An "absence culture."** Despite a great deal of research on absenteeism in the last 30 years, no major breakthroughs have occurred in predicting, understanding, and controlling it. Some researchers attribute the lack of progress to a focus on the individual rather than the group. They say that cost-effective solutions to the problem are unlikely to be found as long as HR practitioners focus on individual employees.

In "The Meaning of Absence: New Strategies for Theory and Research," Gary Johns and Nigel Nicholson argue that "absence cultures" within organizations influence group norms—and ultimately affect the absence rates of individual employees. (The study appeared in 1982 in *Research in Organizational Behavior*.)

An absence culture evidently was operating at SERTA. Bob and Jane had plenty of non-work-related reasons for missing work, but a strong attendance norm at SERTA might have overcome those reasons. To help develop such a culture, SERTA implemented a system of peer support, combined with goal-setting and objective feedback.

Peer support can be helpful because it can provide reassurance and affirmation, contributing to self-esteem. It can also enhance effectiveness by providing a source of concrete advice and help with problem solving. In fact, theories of social facilitation suggest that even the mere presence of others can set the stage for positive behavioral changes, as the target employee modifies his or her actions in an effort to gain or maintain social approval.

**The intervention.** The company paired up Jane and Bob and told them to call one another at home whenever they were inclined to take an unscheduled day off.

For example, if Jane wanted to take a sick day, she would call Bob first. He would ask her why she wanted to stay home and would try to convince her to come to work. If he could not persuade her to come to work for a full day, he would try to convince her to come in for part of the day. Likewise, Bob would call Jane on days when he had decided to stay home.

Jane and Bob agreed to a goal of one month's perfect attendance for both of them.

Before and during the intervention, Carla, as their supervisor, would provide Jane and Bob with objective feedback about their absences.

It is important to note that there were no changes in job assignments or working conditions during the course of the study. The company did not promise the two employees

any reward for reducing their absenteeism. And before the intervention started, Carla assured Bob and Jane that the results of the study would not be used against them in any way.

**Results.** Researchers monitored Jane's and Bob's unscheduled absences before, during, and after the 16-week intervention. Unscheduled absenteeism decreased substantially.

In the two years before the intervention, unscheduled absenteeism averaged 12 percent of Jane's total available work hours and 13.4 percent of Bob's. During the intervention, absenteeism dropped to 2.5 percent for Jane (a dramatic 80 percent decrease) and 10.3 percent for Bob (a 23 percent decrease). On average, absenteeism for both employees fell from 12.7 percent to 6.4 percent, a decline of roughly 50 percent.

After 16 weeks, Jane told Carla that she'd had enough peer support from Bob and wanted the intervention stopped. Not surprisingly, when

the formal feedback and peer support stopped, Jane's absenteeism increased to 11.3 percent—still below the 12 percent pre-intervention figure, but well above the 2.5 percent she averaged during the experiment. But Bob's absenteeism actually decreased further after the experiment ended, from 6.4 percent during the intervention to 5.8 percent afterward.

Overall, the two employees' average absenteeism rose to 8.5 percent after the intervention was discontinued. That figure represents an increase of about 25 percent over the average rate during the experiment, but it is well below the pre-intervention figure of 12.7 percent.

The results of the study support the effectiveness of peer support, feedback, and goal-setting as a useful and cost-effective means of reducing absenteeism.

Why did the intervention work? Interviews with Jane and Bob suggested that they liked communicating with a peer better than dealing with

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their boss. They said they could speak more freely and safely with each other, and that they felt more compelled to be truthful when speaking to a peer rather than a supervisor. They said they could confide in each other about their real reasons for not wanting to go to work, and help each other find ways to overcome the desire to stay away.

Peer support seemed to be the most important part of the intervention, but the feedback about prior and current absenteeism rates had an effect as well.

Carla had assumed that her employees knew how much time they were taking off. Her assumption was wrong. Jane and Bob might have had the feeling that they were taking "too much" time, but they had no idea how much. Both were surprised to learn how often they had actually been absent in recent years—and how much they had been losing in wages.

Some experts recommend similar interventions in which an employee with a record of high absenteeism is paired with a positive role model. SERTA chose instead to pair the two employees with the worst absence records in the department. A program like SERTA's makes it possible for managers to set up peer-support pairs for all willing employees who need them, rather than having to persuade role models to work with problem employees.

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### Seven Steps to Better Performance Appraisals

Appraising employee performance is one of the most difficult aspects of many supervisors' jobs. It may be easy to characterize an employee's work in a particular area as "excellent" or "average." But it's often harder to explain why—and to do it in a way that helps the employee to understand the rating and to improve his or her work.

A supervisor's written comments on an appraisal should reflect a thorough, clear, and precise analysis of the reasons behind job-performance strengths and weaknesses. Generalizations can result in a review that takes individual weaknesses out of context and overemphasizes them. Ambiguous wording can lead to inaccurate and incomplete discussions of the extent of poor performance, the reasons behind it, or its effects.

Trainers can help supervisors increase the accuracy and effectiveness of performance appraisals by teaching them a seven-step process for preparing written comments:

- ▶ Select the job activity.
- ▶ Indicate the degree.
- ▶ Describe the conditions.
- ▶ Suggest an influential factor.
- ▶ Give an example.
- ▶ Point out trends.
- ▶ Show positive consequences.

Following all seven steps should result in a description of 5 to 10 sentences that justifies a supervisor's evaluation of the specific job area or activity.

It is not always necessary to respond to each area of the performance appraisal with lengthy comments containing all seven steps. But appraisers should keep them all in mind while writing appraisal comments, and should refer to the steps and provide examples to illustrate them where appropriate.

**Select the job activity.** A job activity is a specific, observable responsibility or task. It is an element of an overall performance process.

Comments are more useful if they focus on specific components of a work process. For example, an evaluation of the general area of "planning" is bound to be over-generalized and misleading. Such a large area of responsibility would necessitate a broad overview—too broad to be useful to the employee. A more helpful appraisal would look instead at the variety of steps and specific activities that go into the planning process.

For example, a supervisor might comment on details such as designing, preparing, anticipating, researching, arranging, evaluating, determining, and proposing. The supervisor

who focuses on such process components rather than the process as a whole would be better able to identify precisely the relative strengths and weaknesses of the employee's performance of the various activities involved in planning.

**Indicate the degree.** The degree is the extent, amount, rate, or frequency of the activity on which the employee is being evaluated. Examples of phrases indicating degree include "every week," "never," "often," "twice," "to some extent," "moderately," and "at the expected level."

Being specific by indicating the degree to which a project, activity, or task is performed is essential to defusing the employee defensiveness that may be inherent in the appraisal process. Employees are likely to interpret over-generalizations about degree as inaccurate, insensitive, and unfair.

**Describe the conditions.** Describing the particular conditions of job performance indicates when or where the observed job performance happens, with whom it happens, under what circumstances, at what stage, and during what type of activity.

Again, specificity in this area helps stem defensiveness and clarify the job performance under discussion. The suggestion that an employee "needs improvement in organizational skills" implies a need for change that is broad and all-encompassing. The comment, "More care must be taken in planning and organizing the initial stage of research," clears the way for rational discussion about how to improve the relevant procedures and techniques. Such a focus fosters a discussion of process, not personality.

**Suggest an influential factor.** An influential factor may be another job activity or another stage of a work process that affects the activity or task under discussion. Such factors also include previous experience, job knowledge, and external conditions.

An example of the kind of wording that might be used in this part of the performance appraisal: "because of a high or low level of preparation (or concentration, experience, care, monitoring, review, or follow-up)...."

Supervisors must think carefully

about the cause-and-effect relationships among performance factors. An effective appraisal avoids inaccurate inferences and false conclusions concerning the factors that might influence job performance.

Establishing connections between a job process and related factors can lead to better job understanding and better task-analysis skills for the employee.

**Give an example.** An example is a representative instance of a situation that involves the activity on which the employee is being rated.

The key words here are "representative instance." The supervisor must be careful in choosing examples to refer to in the appraisal. If the supervisor points out the one failure, a fluke, or an uncharacteristic act, the employee will see the appraisal as (at the least) picayune or (at the most) grossly unfair.

Recalling such instances will be easier if the supervisor has tracked job performance since the last appraisal. Documenting performance helps the supervisor recall positive and negative instances of job performance throughout the rating period.

By the way, it is best to avoid the traditional terminology, "incident file," which carries negative connotations.

**Point out trends.** Performance trends indicate improvement, decline, or maintenance of job performance levels.

Trends may be increases or decreases in output, errors, the number of projects completed, or the complexity of job assignments. Changes are expressed in terms of time, and frequently begin with such phrases as these: "recently..." "during the last three months..." "since your promotion..." "during the past year..." "since your last appraisal..."

Identifying trends is critical to a focus on employee development as an ongoing process. An employee should be aware of a trend that indicates a downturn; the performance appraisal should include an appropriate goal for improvement. Likewise, trends that indicate improvement merit documentation and recognition.

**Show consequences.** Consequences are the short-term and long-term effects of one factor or job activity. Those consequences may influence another job activity or affect the

quality or quantity of somebody else's work.

Examples of typical wording include "Because you planned carefully, team output as a whole increased," or "As a result of your overall attention to client concerns, the customer increased its orders," or "Due to the extra hours you put into this assignment, the department was able to complete its section of the annual report ahead of schedule."

Pointing out consequences broadens the perspective of a job performance analysis. It helps the employee to see his or her work in terms of its effect on others—and in terms of its effects on organizational success.

**Training for the seven-step process.** Instructing managers in the process begins with a brief explanation of each of the seven points. Trainers

### BE CAREFUL IN CHOOSING EXAMPLES TO REFER TO IN AN APPRAISAL

may want to use a handout that includes the following elements:

- ▶ the title of each step in the process
- ▶ a clear, concise definition of each step
- ▶ examples of typical wording that could be used in performance appraisals.

To help clarify the seven steps and pinpoint their relevance, classroom discussion should cite examples of job performance and wording drawn from the supervisors' work environment. Using a flipchart or white board, the session leader can select an example of a specific job activity and "build" an appraisal of a hypothetical employee's performance of it, through the seven steps of the process.

Training should include a practice exercise that provides trainees with an opportunity to use the seven-step formula to develop sample performance appraisal wording.

The instructor should separate the

class into groups of three or four trainees. The group should agree on a fictitious employee who works in a job category within a department at the company. Participants develop an idea of how well the employee is doing overall, and of how long he or she been in the current job assignment with the company.

Next, the class will have to identify a specific area of job performance to be appraised. The categories included on the company's performance appraisal forms can provide guidelines for this decision. For example, trainees could look at the overall quality of the employee's work, the quantity of the work, or the employee's writing skills, effectiveness with clients, problem solving skills, or telephone skills.

Next, participants should agree on an overall performance level (such as superior, above average, average, or below average) for the employee in the category that has been chosen.

The session leader should then allow 30 to 45 minutes for trainees to go through the seven-step process—selecting a representative job activity, indicating the degree, describing the conditions, and so forth.

Trainees will develop three to five sentences that describe the job performance and explain the justification for the rating. Each group should select a participant to transcribe the sentences onto flipchart sheets. The group should discuss the quality of the appraisal comments and identify areas for possible improvement.

The most important outcome of using the seven-step formula is a series of written comments that precisely describe job performance in terms of specifically observed processes. This kind of carefully worded analysis lends itself to frank and objective discussion. As a result, an employee's understanding of his or her own job performance is likely to increase.

— Robert Cyr

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**"Training 101"** is edited by **Catherine M. Petrini**. Send your short articles for consideration to "Training 101," Training & Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043.