

Smart Workplace Practices™

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Frontline supervisors: Are they the missing link in workers' comp return-to-work programs? Six no (or low) cost strategies

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Why aren't frontline supervisors involved in return-to-work efforts?

It would seem obvious by now that frontline supervisors have a critical role to play in improving employer workers' compensation program results.

Many supervisory return-to-work initiatives seem pretty straightforward. The simple things don't cost much, such as taking someone who has just been injured to the doctor's office ... periodically calling injured employees to let them know they are missed ... sending a card or even flowers. These are the things that often mean the most to someone who is recovering from an injury or work-related illness.

Other return-to-work initiatives take some administrative time and planning, such as evaluating potential transitional and modified duty job options ... writing up job descriptions ... and communicating with employees before an injury occurs so that they know what the company's workers' compensation process involves. Pre-injury planning has a great deal of value, not only in returning someone to work sooner, but in improving workplace productivity overall.

Ongoing, supportive communication is invaluable.

Yet, even given all the good that can come from these activities, more often than not, frontline supervisors are not doing these things. Why? The short answer can be summarized in two words: attitude and behavior.

Six ways supervisors can make impact on return-to-work

Here are six no (or low) cost things that frontline supervisors can do to make an impact.

1. **Take a Positive Approach to New Employee Orientation and Worksite Best Practices.** Beginning with the first day on the job, most employees really do think of the supervisor as "the employer." This presents the frontline supervisor with the distinct opportunity to be viewed positively, as a caring and concerned employer. Building a positive employer/employee relationship starts during orientation. Supervisors need to emphasize to new employees that worksite safety is their number one job. This message will not have significant impact on new hires unless and until frontline supervisors convey it in an honest and meaningful manner. Setting a positive tone and displaying a positive attitude about the importance of injury prevention is the first step.
2. **Emphasize Safe Behavior and Injury Prevention.** Doing things "the right way" may be a cliché, but it's one employees need to know you mean. And, of course, they need to be taught what the "right way" is for the jobs they do. Presenting a positive message on safety during orientation is just a start. Safety must be emphasized every day! To be effective, supervisors must believe that perfect safety is possible and communicate that goal to their employees. Safety training and reinforcement of the processes that lead to safe behavior are critical keys.

3. **Recognize the Power of the Supervisor Relationship with Employees.** The personal relationships which supervisors have with their employees may be the single most important component for a successful program. Formal and informal research shows that how employees feel about their supervisor has a significant impact on the number of workers' compensation claims filed. Employees who feel their supervisors do not care about them, or who otherwise do not respect or get along with their supervisors, frequently file claims to get attention, get more time off work, or "get back" at their supervisors.
4. **Be Sensitive to Employee Personal Issues.** Supervisors who care enough (and take the time) to develop an understanding of their employees at a personal, as well as a professional level, can make an even bigger impact. Remember the "extended family" concept. Identifying employees who may be able to resolve a personal problem with the help of an EAP or wellness program (substance abuse, for example) can go a long way not only in reducing workers' comp costs but also in building the employer/employee relationship.
5. **Creating Transitional Job Opportunities Can Add Real Value.** As I mentioned earlier, the task of evaluating possible modified and transitional jobs that can help an injured employee come back to work early is not always easy. The best results come from a thorough review of all the possibilities! One way to start is by looking at it this way. Every supervisor usually has a "wish list" of tasks and activities that he or she would like to get done but never had the manpower to do. Review the wish lists. Some modified-duty jobs may come to light there. Getting these tasks done is like "found money." Take a look at the tasks and services that you are now outsourcing. Consider how some of these might be brought in house. You can save money that would normally be spent for outside services by assigning the job to a transitional worker.

Creating transitional jobs such as these gives employees who were injured at work a sense of pride because they know they are making a productive contribution to the company. The same is true for employees who have missed work due to a non-occupational injury or illness. Once you have identified modified-duty job situations, you might consider offering these return-to-work options to these employees, too.

6. **Incident Management.** Pre-planning pays off when an accident occurs. Good communication regarding employee rights, return-to-work programs and the employer's workers' compensation process prior to an accident reduces anxiety. Employees need to know what the workers' compensation process involves and what they need to do. Supervisors should, of course, show concern and take all incidents and injuries seriously, even when they are minor. Remember, even when an employee only needs a Band-Aid, showing concern shows care. By emphasizing that you care and encouraging employees to identify problems early, you are setting the stage for a positive outcome in workers' recovery and lower cost.

**No-cost,
low-cost ways
to attract,
keep good
employees**

In addition to the ideas I have suggested above, holding regular meetings or training sessions with department heads and supervisors can have a significant impact on sustaining changes in attitudes and resulting behavior. Topics such as the ones listed below are good jumping off points for ongoing discussions that lead to significant changes in supervisor attitudes and a proactive return-to-work program.

For a list of 33 no-cost and low-cost benefits you can give your employees ... to make working for you more attractive, contact Employers of America for a free copy of *Smart Workplace Practices*, (515) 424-3187, www.employerhelp.org.

- The American Disabilities Act (ADA) impact on workers' compensation.
- Medical review of the most common occupational-related injuries and safety hazards.
- Biomechanical task and worksite motion analysis (try a hands-on demonstration).
- Ergonomic education with tools, furniture and assisted devices.
- Showcase successes, share ideas on how to improve the process.

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