

**Implementation Aid No. 38****Illness-Related Discussions:****Section 2: Work Absence Discussion**

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If you would like to **reduce the illness-related work absences**, you must influence the behaviour of the affected employees. In order to do so, you must “do the unthinkable”: You must speak with your employees. **Good work absence discussions give** the employee **insight** into the fact that he has an influence on his inability to work and can reduce his work absence days.

**The Work Absence Discussion:**

1. No generalisations
2. Focus on the right things
3. The “welcome-back” discussion
4. The “zero-days” discussion
5. The work absence discussion
6. Creating a commitment

This Implementation Aid will show you how you can appropriately speak with the employees about absences that can be influenced.

**1. No generalisations**

Each case is different. Thus, discussions regarding illness cannot be formalised. Quite the contrary, **standardised discussions are detrimental**. If the employee’s absences are based upon an **inability to work which he cannot influence**, then work absence discussions are demotivating because the employee can change nothing.<sup>1</sup>

**Example:** The supervisor does not look forward to having the work absence discussion with an employee after he broke his arm in a car accident and has been suffering from related injuries because he knows that this discussion will be senseless. His employee “simply” had bad luck—a **change in behaviour is not possible** in this situation. Demotivation will occur because a system requires the supervisor to conduct this work absence discussion.

*“You indeed know that I have to conduct this discussion. It’s the system’s fault...”*

Through such statements, **supervisors devalue** the effectiveness of all **purposeful work absence meetings** because what will the employee then **report to his colleagues** about the discussion?

**Allow** the supervisor to decide with which employee he conducts which discussion.

<sup>1</sup> UH22: Reducing Work Absences through Motivation [www.umsetzungshilfe.de/22](http://www.umsetzungshilfe.de/22)

## 2. Focus on the right things.

Good supervisors have evaluated the illness-related work absences of their employees based upon two categories over recent years:

- **Number** of work absences
- **Breakdown** of the work absences

Let's look at the **evaluation** conducted by a team leader:

Employee	Work Absences Current Year	Frequency Current Year	Frequency Previous Year
A	30	1x30	0x0
B	17	1x5; 6x2	1x4; 4x2
C	14	1x14	0x0
D	9	1x5; 4x1	1x8; 4x1
E	7	1x7	0x0
F	0	0x0	0x0

With whom should the supervisor **speak**?

Right, with everyone. Only the type of discussion will be different. Think about it: The goal of the work absence discussion is **changing conduct**. According to the chart, which employees do you believe **need to and can** change?

## 3. The “welcome-back” discussion<sup>2</sup>

A certainly has the most work absences, but **no work absence discussion will help in this case**. The supervisors will often know the reasons: An accident, a severe illness.

Utilise the “welcome-back” discussion and be pleased that the employee is back at work. Ask him whether he still has any restrictions and requires support. Update him about what happened over the course of the recent weeks when he wasn't there.

As a direct supervisor, you will also conduct a “welcome-back” discussion with B, C, D and E. Show the employees that you noticed their absence.

## 4. The “zero-day” discussion

You have enough unpleasant discussions to conduct. Thus, also conduct a pleasant discussion on the theme of work absences. Go **personally to the employees** who had no days during the last year where they were unable to work.

**Thank** the employee that he was always there last year.

<sup>2</sup> UH36: “Welcome-Back” Discussion ([www.umsetzungshilfe.de/36](http://www.umsetzungshilfe.de/36))

You will sometimes get curious reactions (“Nice that you also noticed that.”), but secretly **the employees will be pleased**.

And go **personally** to the employee because the scarcest resource which you as a supervisor have is **your time**. Your employee also knows this quite well. **Bonuses** or other small tokens of appreciation lead to the treadmill of extrinsic motivation and even **detrimentally affect** the reduction of work absences over the medium term. Also keep in mind that you have already settled the employee’s wage claims for his work. Or do you also pay privately once again for things which you have already paid for?

## 5. The work absence discussion

If any statistics stand out (on the chart above, employees B and D), invite the employee to a work absence discussion. Thus, for example, employees who are 35 years of age who already have 15 to 25 work absence days per year should awaken your **interest**. What do you think, how many work absences will such employees have in five to ten years? Fewer? **Avoid** already today the **difficult cases** of tomorrow.

Firstly, tell the employee as precisely as possible the reason for the discussion. In this regard, only describe, don’t judge:

*“You are here because you were unable to work two days on six occasions, always Mondays and Tuesdays.”*

Show the employee what stands out in his personal inability to work statistics and then ask him:

*“Are your two absences on six occasions operationally-related?”*

At this point, 90% of the employees will say that it has nothing to do with the work duties.

### 5.1 Illness is related to the work activities

If the employee says that it is attributable to his work activities, evaluate the plausibility of this statement. If you are sceptical, then ask him why the other employees have had far fewer work absences in the same workplace. Your core argument: *“If other employees in the same workplace have substantially fewer work absences, then this must also be possible for you as well.”*

If you can indeed believe the employee's operational reason for the frequent work absences, then ask him what he recommends, what must concretely be changed in the workplace.

*“What do you recommend in order to eliminate the operational reason?”*

At this point, be **patient**. Even if five great ideas occur to you, you must allow the **employee himself** to make a recommendation. Moderate him to an acceptable solution, but don't just simply prescribe the solution. So that the measure functions correctly, it must be recommended by the employee. If you have a recommendation which you believe to also be implementable, ask one more question before you proceed to implementation:

*“That means when we have implemented this operational measure, your number of work absences will go down?”*

If the employee does not answer “yes”, begin the discussion from the beginning. If the employee answers “yes”, document the discussion and set up a follow-up discussion.

## 5.2 Illness is not related to the work activities

If the cause of the inability to work is **not related to the work activities**, it must lie in the **private sphere**. Thus, the discussion is not yet ended. Ask the employee about **his personal measures**.

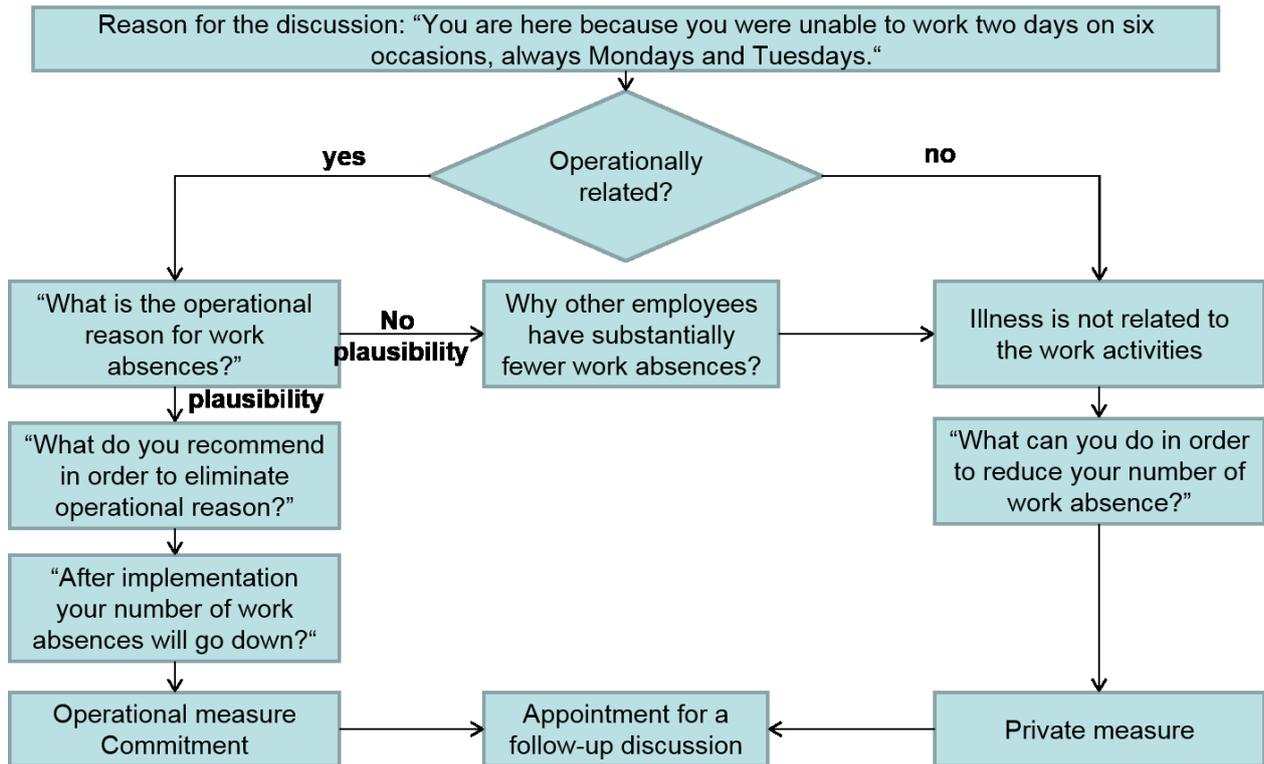
*“What can you do in order to reduce your number of work absences?”*

Allow the employee to only then leave the discussion when he has identified personal measures. Remain true to your argumentation chain:

1. *“If the reasons for missing two days on six occasions are not operationally-related, then they must originate from your personal environment. Then you must also implement measures from your personal environment.”*
2. Remind the employee that he has an obligation under his employment agreement to maintain good health.
3. Ask the employee which he prefers—to be healthy or to be sick. He himself has a personally-vested interest in illness-reducing measures.

**6. Create a commitment**

- Document the reason for the discussion.
- Document the results.
- Set an appointment for a follow-up discussion.
- If the measures were not successful, formulate new measures. Do not allow the employee to leave the discussion before he has obligated himself to the new measures.



**Nothing good happens unless you make it happen!** (Erich Kästner)

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Resources:

Enrico Briegert, Thomas Hochgeschurtz (2011): Management. Ikotes Publishing House, Bühl.

### **Would you Like to Improve Management?**

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