

NOTHING LEFT BEHIND

Prepare your team for an extended absence



By **MICHAEL WAGNER, CSP, ASM**

If you are the leader of your organization, department or team, you know how important it is to ensure everyone understands their daily responsibilities and to create a working environment that strives to follow the vision and objectives. This becomes even more vital when an extended absence is on the horizon for individuals who are key players in the organization. Here we will discuss what obstacles your team might face considering those extended absences, and how to prepare them to be successful in the interim.

What are the challenges?

When absenteeism arises, the company and staff may face many challenges. Don't just consider what may happen within the organization; you also need to think about the external connections of the company and the individual's relationships.

While the lists (at right) are not exhaustive, these are some of the most important considerations when preparing for a leave of absence and considering them will help you prepare the company and staff for what may happen. You can never plan too early, as a leave of absence may come as a surprise or become unpredictable, so it is important to begin developing and preparing your staff for the what-if scenario.

POSSIBLE INTERNAL/EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

Internal

- What are the individual's daily responsibilities and tasks in their role?
- Who do they directly supervise and lead?
- What department, team or operation do they manage, and how will those different areas get the support they need?
- If this individual manages workplace functions across all departments, would it be better to have those managed in their respective departments during the absence, or through a centralized role?
- What tasks need to be prioritized based on need, such as accounting and financial, personnel management, safety, decision making, communication, etc.?
- How will you communicate and coordinate across the company while this individual is gone?

External


- What vendors and suppliers do they work with? Are they aware of the situation and do they know who to communicate with?
- Do they manage client and customer needs, accounts, services, complaints, etc.?
- How will these be handled and who will directly receive communication?
- Who will manage the invoicing, purchasing and accounting functions during the absence?
- Are there other duties of this individual, such as participating in associations, public relations, and attending events that may need to be handled?

Preparing your staff for the unexpected

When you don't have the opportunity to plan for an unexpected absence, it will show how well you prepared your staff for the unknown. There are many things you can do to help your

team prepare for this situation, and it all begins with good leadership and teaching your staff.

Many of us have talked about the term "cross-functional," and this is a major reason successful organizations place a focus on it. Take the time



to teach your team about the responsibilities and skills needed to complete others' tasks, even if tasks are shared among more than one person. Here are some tips for preparing for the unknown:

① Train your staff early and teach others how to perform tasks normally done by the absent individual but that have relevancy to their roles.

② Create a hard copy of the plan or reference material so these resources can be utilized if questions arise.

③ Create a contact list for the team or department so that everyone knows who to contact for specific responsibilities and information.

④ Communicate who will manage and supervise in light of your absence before it happens, so that everyone in and outside the company is aware of who they need to contact.

⑤ Focus on teaching the prioritization of tasks and needs, so that others are aware of how operations currently happen and they can continue without interruption.

⑥ Build a culture of teamwork, accountability and trust, as that type of culture can help bind the people, tasks and objectives through adversity.

Prepare your staff for the expected

On the flip side of the unexpected, planning for an extended absence provides you the chance to organize and communicate with the team and personnel, and prepare for time away from the office. In this

situation, there is an opportunity for the absent individual and the company to notify vendors, suppliers, clients and external parties, and to plan accordingly.

Make sure you use this time wisely. Use the tips in the previous section, and work to set in place all responsibilities, resources, services, staff and communication preferences beforehand.

Another great way to maintain and strengthen the relationships, culture and efforts of the team, department or company while the extended absence takes place is to have a team building event, barbeque or lunch prior to the absence. Make sure that the staff knows how supportive the leaders and managers are, and how good communication and patience will get everybody through the challenges. With time to plan, take advantage of the opportunity and increase your chances of success.

Avoid the scramble

Many scenarios can happen, and it takes preparation and proactiveness in setting up your team for success. Don't wait until something happens and you're scrambling to make things work, or you don't even have the time to scramble because you're just throwing it together to make it work. Give your company, teams and personnel the opportunity to shine in the absence of a key player and be there to lead them to victory by using this information. **SB**

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Continued from page 33

Especially for food. If you can't get anything else to eat for four days, what's your plan?

Hotels. Our use of hotels to stage team members has grown. They are instructed to bring a bag with necessities and changes of clothes so they can go to the hotel and shower and nap before going back out into the field.

Communication. We added additional layers of pre-storm communication with clients.

Fuel. We increased fuel storage at all of our facilities in the event gas stations are ever closed for extended days.

Counseling. In hindsight, we should have had mental health professionals available to provide assistance. We didn't because the effects of the event didn't really surface until much later; but if it were to happen again, I certainly would.

A bright spot in darkness

We pride ourselves on plowing snow and taking care of our customers. When we were able to move equipment, we had to triage who we serviced first. For our top-tier customers who needed us the most, we were there for them in a huge way.

They held appreciation lunches for us and there was a lot of goodwill shown to the team. To hear our clients say "Your work saved lives"—that positive feedback likely saved more of my people from getting out of the business altogether.

We also saw how essential our work is when the National Guard commandeered one of our loaders and had them plow through the snow to get to a woman in labor—amid all of the trauma, life goes on. As traumatic as it was and something we hope never happens again, this is the profession we have chosen. We learn from it and plow forward. **SB**

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