

Compassionate yes, but not casual

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The decision on whether or not to grant an employee compassionate leave is a major test of a manager's skill, both at "reading" situations and "reading" people. And whatever confidential dialogue may take place in private, the decision becomes public knowledge, and puts out a signal about the company's attitude to employee welfare.

Managers have two kinds of compassionate leave to supervise. There is often a company policy of paid leave of absence for bereavement or other emergencies involving family members.

That will normally be available to anyone suffering from a severe family problem such as illness or death and the rest of the team, who have to carry the extra load, will generally accept that.

More difficult to administer is the discretionary allowance for special circumstances, such as one case where a keen amateur show-jumper was badly affected by the death of her favourite horse. Or the increasingly available option of allowing an employee to work from home, thus allowing a mother to look after an ill child, while still performing most of her office work-function.

Rest of the team

There is no doubt that such sympathetic gestures can build long-term goodwill, increased loyalty and often better productivity. But there is always the danger of low morale in the rest of the team, who may feel that they are being asked to compensate too much - so compassionate leave has to be authorised with caution.

Also the very word "compassionate" makes this a controversial area. To some employees, a policy that leaves room for compassion is the sign of an enlightened forward-thinking organisation. To others, it may be seen as a weakness of the organisation that can be exploited.

I remember a furniture designer who made a second career out of this. He would pretend that his wife was suffering from cancer and needed expensive treatment that he could not afford without getting into debt.

The company took pity on him and lent him the money interest-free, as well as giving him additional time off work.

After a few months, he announced that she had died, and that he would need even more time off, to grieve. In fact, he simply moved on to a different furniture-design company and tried the same trick on a new, inexperienced manager.

This man had identified a special "X-factor" in the situation - that people applying for compassionate leave immediately acquire some kind of super-sensitive status.

Managers are reluctant to properly investigate the situation with any thoroughness. Also, in this case, he was working in an industry that had a casual culture.

Clearly, management must exercise vigilance when evaluating an application for compassionate leave of absence. Then you are free to apply that business and human judgment that marks out the effective

manager.

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