

Although it may affect productivity, if you keep an employee who is clearly ill on the job you're running the risk of contaminating everyone in the shop. Is it worth it? Not unless you're looking for an empty building.

Should we wave, salute, or maybe just ignore making any formal gesture when greeting customers, friends, and our fellow workers? If you listen to the pundits worried about a possible flu pandemic, the best way to avoid it would be for us all to just stay home, isolated from all contact with everyone, including our families. This, of course, is a ridiculous and impossible suggestion, but there are steps we all can take that will decrease the possibility of coming down with the flu. The first line of defense, naturally, is cleanliness. Placing an emphasis on washing hands frequently is a good start, and it's also a good idea to have some large bottles of waterless hand-washing fluid available all around the shop to encourage employees to wash often. This product is often for sale in places like dollar stores or buying clubs, so the cost of taking this simple step is not much.

A second line of defense involves discouraging the practice of employees eating at their machines or workstations. This is not a clean environment in which to eat, obviously, and it's an area where many people congregate who might be carrying a virus that can cause the flu or the common cold. If you can confine eating to a cafeteria or break room, and be sure that it is cleaned and sanitized on a regular basis, it will contribute to a smaller incidence of cold and flu outbreaks among your employees.

Another simple precaution is to have disposable tissues available to all employees. I find that workers will use the tissues to block coughs and sneezes if they are available and,


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again, this is a very inexpensive item that can be purchased in bulk so it doesn't represent a major expense. One thing to remember in particular if you follow this advice is that it's just as important to have a handy disposal device where the tissues will be used as it is to have them available in the first place. This will really help cut down on the spread of germs and viruses.

Okay, now let's take on the difficult part of this discussion: Should we send an employee who is obviously sick home? And if we do, what do we do about their lost wages, not to mention the lost production? Do you make sick time available to your employees? If not, how do you feel about sending an employee home when they're clearly not feeling well? This is a very involved and complicated issue, and I would welcome any ideas that readers may have in terms of good responses and resolutions. For now I will discuss how I handle the situation at my company, and that is to insist that an employee who

is ill—and possibly contagious—go home immediately so they won't pass the illness along to our other employees. We do not have paid sick leave, and that is pointed out in the employee handbook. If at all possible, however, we will attempt to allow the employee to make up the hours as soon as they have recovered.

There is a problem with this approach, though. How do you tell whether an employee is actually sick or not, and when do you know a person who's still exhibiting symptoms—such as with a cold—is no longer contagious? Everyone is different, and there are those who will go home at the first sniffle while others will work through a heart attack without mentioning that anything's wrong. When you're dealing with the latter type of employee it is very important that you convey to them that, if they're legitimately ill, there will be no repercussions attached to going home to rest and recuperate—and not just for themselves, but for their coworkers as well.

All of this brings to mind the old joke about the memo stating “All employees calling in sick, please do so before 9:00 a.m. on the day of the game.” The fact that this joke is so funny points out how true it really is, and also why so many employers are suspicious about whether someone who says they're feeling ill really does or not. The only answer that I have is that you've got to have a relationship with your employees that allows for open communication and trust. That way you don't have to waste a lot of time second guessing their claims. 

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