

Mercy's Behavioral Modification



To address the growing problem of absenteeism and excessive sick leave, Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore introduced a carrot-and-stick approach based on classic behavior modification principles. Mercy's 2,000 employees are allowed nine episodes of illness each year before they risk being fired. (One "episode" can include several continuous days of absenteeism.) Bosses are encouraged to educate employees about attendance and to call staff who are out sick. Meanwhile, employees with six months of perfect attendance receive a \$100 bonus. Those with one year without absenteeism have their names put in a drawing for up to \$3,000.

Other examples include VJS Foods, a British food company, reduced absenteeism by giving employees with perfect attendance each month two chances to win U.S.\$500. Rhode Island shipyard Electric Boat recently awarded \$2,500 to each of 20 winners drawn from a pool of 955 employees who had not called in sick for at least two years. Student attendance improved (particularly in the last hour of classes) when some Los Angeles high schools introduced a lottery-based prize to students who had no absences over the previous week.

Companies can learn from this example, and apply behavioral modification principles to enhance companies productivity and mitigate the risk of strategic derailment. However, In spite of these favorable results, behavior modification has several limitations. It is more difficult to apply to conceptual activities than to observable behaviors. For example, it's much easier to reward employees for good work attendance than for good problem solving.

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