



Developing Reliable Employees in a Call-in-Sick Society

Reliability is the backbone of every successful brand.

If your package absolutely, positively has to be there overnight, you don't take it to the post office, you FedEx it because you can rely on Federal Express.

Similarly, if you call my office during our business hours (from 7:30a-4:30p Monday-Thursday and 7:30a-1:30p on Friday) I can guarantee that your call will be answered on the first or second ring. The person you will be speaking to is Christie Michelle.

Christie has been my trusty right hand associate since 2004, and over these past ten years, she has never missed a day of work. In spite of having to commute on days where the weather in Denver is very unkind, she always plans ahead and is never late to the office. She eats lunch at her desk while she works and she never asks to leave early. What's more, Christie doesn't take any kind of break throughout the course of the day, and I've never known her to conduct personal business, play computer solitaire, make personal calls/texts, or Facebook while on company time.

Since Christie has been with me, I've worked closely with hundreds of employers, and there aren't any of them that wouldn't kill for people who demonstrate that kind of reliability. Thirty years ago, they were common. Today, employees like Christie are an endangered species.

Sadly, reliability has become a "yeah, but" value among many Americans. It's one of those things we not only expect, but that we demand from others while excusing ourselves from the pesky little responsibilities it might bring our way.

"You were five minutes late. Again."

"Yeah, but it was only five minutes. And I caught some bad traffic, you know? Besides, what's the big deal? You act like I'm the second gunman and the grassy knoll, for crying out loud. It's just five minutes, dude."

"You didn't complete the report."

"Yeah, but this is the first time in the last three weeks I didn't get it in on time. I've been way more consistent about getting mine in than Alex has. So before you get all up in my grill, go ask him if he's got his."

The new workforce has been raised to believe that a good excuse can get them out of any situation, that authority figures rarely follow through on threats, and that by citing examples of others who've also been irresponsible it will make their actions less noticeable.

Many parents perpetuate the myth that individualism trumps responsibility. That's why employers hear a lot of the "I'm really a night person, so you shouldn't expect me to make it to work that early in the morning" comments from young workers.

There has also been a societal trend to water down standards for behaviors around absenteeism. A Harris Interactive survey in 2010, for instance, found that 57 percent of salaried employees say they take sick days when they aren't really sick. Calling in sick when you don't feel like going to work has become so commonplace, no one gives it much thought anymore. But that doesn't make it right.

Instilling Reliability as a Core Value

Of course, nobody is perfect, but instilling reliability into your young hires isn't about trying to make them perfect. It's about instilling within them the importance of consistently making every possible effort and going all out to consistently deliver what is expected of them on schedule.

This starts with setting clear expectations for each worker and then holding tight to those standards. That means you need to think through your expectations for reliability, including the consequences when people are unreliable and the rewards for those who consistently prove their dependability.

Before you can instill any degree of reliability, you'll probably have to invest some time deprogramming the "yeah, but" thinking out of them. "Yeah, but" may have gotten them through high school, worked on the coach to get them out of soccer practice, and even helped them navigate their dating life peers, but they need to learn that it doesn't fly in the workplace. They may not understand why they can't take Thursdays off, call in sick when they don't feel like working, or leave a little early when they've got a hot date. You've got to wake them up to realities of reliability in business, and do it in a way that they'll internalize for the long haul, and that requires one-to-one mentoring and face time.

Don't wait until they screw up to lecture them. Instead, look for an opportunity to get them to relate the importance of being dependable by using an analogy from their world. For instance, ask them how frustrated they get when a cell phone call drops or when their Internet connection bogs down. Ask them what happens when they make a reservation and the restaurant doesn't take it down or loses it, or when the pizza they order delivered to their door turns out to be cold, missing the cheese, arrives late, or worse, doesn't arrive at all. Let them feel the weight of unreliability, and intentionally build a 'gripe session' around it so they feel free to vent about other people and other businesses that have let them down. But resist the temptation to jump in with a lecture as they'll see it coming and turn you off.

Once you both agree how frustrating it can be to depend on someone only to be completely let down because "they spaced it out" or "couldn't get their car started," you'll find an easy transition in getting them to take an objective look at reliability as it applies to their personal brands. When they understand how it affects their reputation, DeShawn and Haley will strive to be as reliable as FedEx and Christie.

Help them see the fallacies and pitfalls of the "I don't feel like it" mentality. Through role-playing, discussion, or actual events that they experience while on the job for you, getting them to internalize the importance of reliability in your business -- and in their career -- is worth every minute you invest.

Eric Chester, Internationally Acclaimed Expert on Employee Engagement, Workplace Culture, and the Emerging Workforce, is an award-winning speaker and best-selling author, and a 2004 inductee into the National Speakers Association Hall of Fame.