

THE TAKEAWAY

Board members quietly fear that their firms are overpromising.

That guidance might involve telling management to tone down the climate-related bravado. Promising to be net zero within a few decades may be flashy; more than one-fifth of the world's largest corporations have pledged to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. But it's a promise that could be difficult to keep, and the CEOs who are making such commitments now probably won't hold their current positions long enough to see this goal through. Directors might be better served guiding management to pursue more modest but still definitive goals. "Make sure the goals you enunciate are achievable, and that you have evidence that you are meeting those goals," Carey says.

Another oversight suggestion: tell executives to seek outside help. No single organization can reduce the world's emissions to net zero, and none will be able to completely offset its own emissions. Executives everywhere will need to work with their big suppliers and seek out new technologies from innovative organizations.

Perhaps most importantly, directors should consider looking at whether executives are incentivized to get to net zero. To get big organizations to take definitive actions, directors should tie a larger portion of executive compensation to hitting net-zero-related targets. "This is not just going to happen willy-nilly," Carey says. ▀



LEADERSHIP

BY LISA RABASCA ROEPE

Sick Days Up, Impatience Too?

AMID A PANDEMIC THAT CREATED one tragic health crisis after another, it's somewhat remarkable that sick days at US firms didn't skyrocket. In fact, according to one data-marketing firm, a third of workers took no sick days in 2020 and 2021. Before COVID, nearly six in ten people took up to five sick days a year.

Give companies credit for trying to change, with new wellness programs that encourage employees to watch their health and take sick days when needed. But as the pandemic eases and workload increases, patience among coworkers may start to wear thin fast, experts say, creating new tension among teams. "The pandemic has brought

out the best and worst in people,” says Shannon G. Taylor, Ph.D., a professor of management at the University of Central Florida in Orlando who has studied employee attitudes toward sick coworkers.

Before COVID, it was not unusual for sick employees to ask if they could work from home, says Ron Porter, a Korn Ferry senior client partner and member of the firm’s Global Human Resources Center of Expertise. Now, he says, employees are calling their bosses, saying they can’t work from home because they don’t feel well—a reflection not only of the better wellness plans but also of shifting employee attitudes since the pandemic. Today, of course, a growing number of workers are looking for better work-life balances and deciding that working through illness makes no sense. “Some employees may be looking at the bigger picture and realizing work isn’t the be-all and end-all,” Porter says.

But experts say it’s more than likely that managers and colleagues may become more quietly miffed at some people’s sick days. Today, after all, millions of people are quitting jobs, and firms are struggling to fill these and other staffing shortages. That means absences are likely to be felt a lot more. “We’re working with leaner resources today and the job market

is tight,” Porter says. When one person is out of the office, everyone else has to pick up more work. “If someone is feeling like they have enough on their plate, they don’t want to be bothered by other people’s issues,” Taylor says.

The remote-work era has also changed this dynamic. Some workers might have less empathy for colleagues because they don’t see them in the office every day. Or, with new hires arriving but working remotely, their colleagues may never have met them in person. In short, the “office” has become a world with many strangers. “Without strong social bonds, we’re less tolerant of people and don’t trust them as much,” Porter says.

Answers to any of this won’t come easy. Porter says a good start would be for managers to remind a team dealing with an absence that they too will likely need to take a sick day at some point. Smart leaders will also try to spread the share of extra work more evenly, or extend project deadlines that aren’t critical and that stretch staffers thin. Either way, as with many issues like these, change starts at the top. “Managers should lead by example,” says Taylor. “If a company culture supports not working when you’re sick, then managers need to demonstrate that.”

THE TAKEAWAY

The great labor shortage is having many unseen impacts.

WHAT’S ON THE NEXT BOARD AGENDA

1

DIVERSITY

In 2022, stakeholders will want more inclusive organizations top to bottom—and for boards to push management on this.

2

DIGITAL SECURITY

Provide oversight on defenses against ever-growing security threats such as privacy violations, misuse of data, and fraud.

3

FINANCIAL ACUMEN

Cryptocurrencies. SPACs. Inflation. Blockchain. Boards need more directors with top-notch—and current—finance skills.