

GUIDE WHAT TO DO WHEN A TEAM MEMBER IS ABSENT?

You are the **first point of contact** for your team member when they are absent. Your role is to listen and maintain the connection between the employee and the company. Staying in touch is key, not only to demonstrate involvement but also to ensure that the employee follows the procedures correctly. The extent of your involvement in the specifics of their absence largely depends on the team member themselves.

>> FIRST CONTACT BY PHONE

The first contact with the employee is usually a phone call aimed at **showing your engagement** and obtaining information about the expected duration of their absence.

Make sure to tell your team member that **you are there for them**, also during this period of absence.

Keep in mind that an employee is **not obligated** to disclose the reason for their illness. If this information is not voluntarily shared, you cannot inquire further or insist on knowing.

Discuss **how you will inform the team** about the situation. Take time yourself to consider how the team member's tasks will be managed in their absence.

Check how your employee feels about certain work-related matters, especially if there are ongoing tasks being handled by other colleagues.

Make (if necessary) agreements on which **communication channels** should be avoided (Teams, email, SMS, participation in work-related WhatsApp groups, etc.).

Set agreements on your contact with each other. Discuss if and how you will stay in touch and make it clear that you are there for them.

>> ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES

During the notification conversation, check with your employee whether everything required on their end to ensure their absence is **legally compliant** has been arranged. However, it is the employee's responsibility to follow the procedure correctly.

As a leader, keep a close eye on the administrative aspects as well. **Your involvement** makes a difference.

>> THE FOLLOW-UP

As a leader, maintain contact based on the agreements you have made.

Take note of the key points from the conversation for your own reference, so you can **refer back** to them in future discussions. It shows you were listening.

Prepare the questions you want to ask in advance. For example: *"Would you like to stay involved and informed about what's happening at work?"*

When asking about recovery time, make it clear that the question only concerns the **estimated duration** of the recovery, not the illness itself, which is protected by medical confidentiality. Be aware that the employee may not yet have an idea of the expected duration at this time.

If there is no clarity on the recovery time, emphasize the importance of considering the return as part of the team and the organization. Let the employee know that you, as a leader, are open to discussing this. Research indicates that **three months** is the tipping point after which returning to work becomes more challenging. At this stage, a new balance tends to develop both in personal life and at work, making it increasingly difficult to break.

>> BEHIND THE SCENES

Keep track of the key changes within the department or the team that may be relevant for the employee returning to work after an absence.

Support the team and provide extra recognition to colleagues who take on work from the absent employee.
Determine what information they need regarding their absent colleague.

>> SELF-CARE FOR YOU AS A LEADER

When someone on your team is absent for an extended period, this can also impact you as a leader.

Beyond the practical adjustments and potentially difficult conversations, it may affect you personally as well. That's why it's important to **take care of yourself** during this time. Talk about it with fellow leaders or seek support from HR.

You are not alone. There are many resources available that you or your employees can rely on within the organisation.

Offering external support to an employee? This overview provides the key (external) organizations, helplines, and websites.



>> REFERRAL TO EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Tele-onthaal: Talk about anything that's on your mind, what you need to share, or any doubts you have (call 106).

CAW Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk: In Belgium, the Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk (CAW) offers support for individuals facing various challenges, including emotional distress, relationship issues, and social problems.

CGZ Centrum Geestelijke Gezondheidszorg: are specialized centers that provide ambulatory psychological and psychiatric care to individuals with serious mental health issues.

Druglijn: is a Flemish service offering anonymous information, advice, and guidance on alcohol, drugs, psychoactive medication, gambling, and excessive gaming.

Tabakstop: is a free service in Belgium that offers information and support to individuals who want to quit smoking.

AWEL: is a Flemish helpline in Belgium dedicated to supporting children and young people. Formerly known as the Kinder- en Jongeren-telefoon (KJT), Awel offers a confidential and anonymous platform for youth to discuss their questions, stories, or problems.

Kankerlijn: [komoptegenkanker.be](https://www.komoptegenkanker.be), [allesoverkanker.be](https://www.allesoverkanker.be), [kanker.be](https://www.kanker.be) is the support and information line of *Kom op tegen Kanker*. It provides a listening ear, expert advice, or an encouraging conversation for cancer patients, survivors, and their loved ones.