

Resilience in the event of long-term absenteeism

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Long-term absenteeism is a persistent problem in the police organisation in the Netherlands. Around 4% of staff has been absent for over three months. For the National Police's Enhancing Professional Resilience programme, we conducted research into opportunities for increasing people's resilience when returning to work after such a long period of absenteeism. This research provides suggestions for dealing with the problem of long-term absenteeism effectively. The following issues turned out to be important: the scope of employees of their reintegration process, reciprocity in the relationship between line manager and police employee, greater knowledge of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and its causes and finally, dealing with diversity in the organisation in an active manner.

Introduction

Politie Nederland set up the Enhancing Professional Resilience (*Versterking Professionele Weerbaarheid*) programme in 2011 with three main objectives:

- To enhance the resilience of police officers
- To increase the expertise of police officers
- To increase employability and operational employability among the police

The project 'Everyone involved' (*Iedereen doet mee*), which was started in the spring of 2013 in five units and in Politie Nederland's IT service, and focuses on reducing long-term absenteeism, forms part of this programme. In the context of this project, TNO conducted quantitative research into backgrounds to absenteeism of three months and longer within Politie Nederland (Huis et al., 2014). Moreover it was investigated how rapid solutions can be implemented by a specific investment of specialists. In this process it became clear that some of the absent staff have questions about the meaning of work. The project management team ascertained that “they are questions that affect the individual police officer, but also the police organisation itself: what scope is there to effectively deploy people in difficult circumstances? And by effectively we mean matching the development of the employee in question and of the organisation as a whole.” (Ditewig, 2014)

¹ This article was written based on a study in collaboration with Politie Nederland's Enhancing Professional Resilience (*Versterking Professionele Weerbaarheid*) programme. Project managers of the study from the police organisation were Andre Ditewig and Willem Lansing, whose considerable expertise in this field has been of major benefit.

Therefore a need for research came afore which, based on the quantitative knowledge found, was helpful in finding starting points for an approach of this type. We opted for a qualitative pilot in which insight is gained into underlying act mechanisms in the organisation that enable or prevent the necessary scope for adequate solutions. Stories of individual police officers who experience absenteeism in the context of Politie Nederland for longer than three months form a central part of this. We formulated questions at several levels. At individual level, we looked at police officers' motives for their work and how this is in keeping with the workplace. At organisational level, the central question was what common themes are coming to the fore in the individual processes that provide an idea of the starting points relevant to the police organisation for enhancing police officers' (moral) resilience. This article mainly focuses on the latter question.

Context of the study

Average sickness-related absence in the Netherlands has already been declining for a number of years. Statistics Netherlands (CBS) reported that in 2014, sickness-related absence was at the lowest point since 1996. Whereas the sickness-related absence recorded during the second quarter of 2011 was 4.1%, during the same period three years later, this figure was 3.9% (source: Statistics Netherlands, 24 November 2014). Data from the National Working Conditions Survey (*Nationale Enquête Arbeidsomstandigheden*) processed by Huis et al. (2014) shows that the situation with the police as far as the frequency of absences is concerned is less rosy.

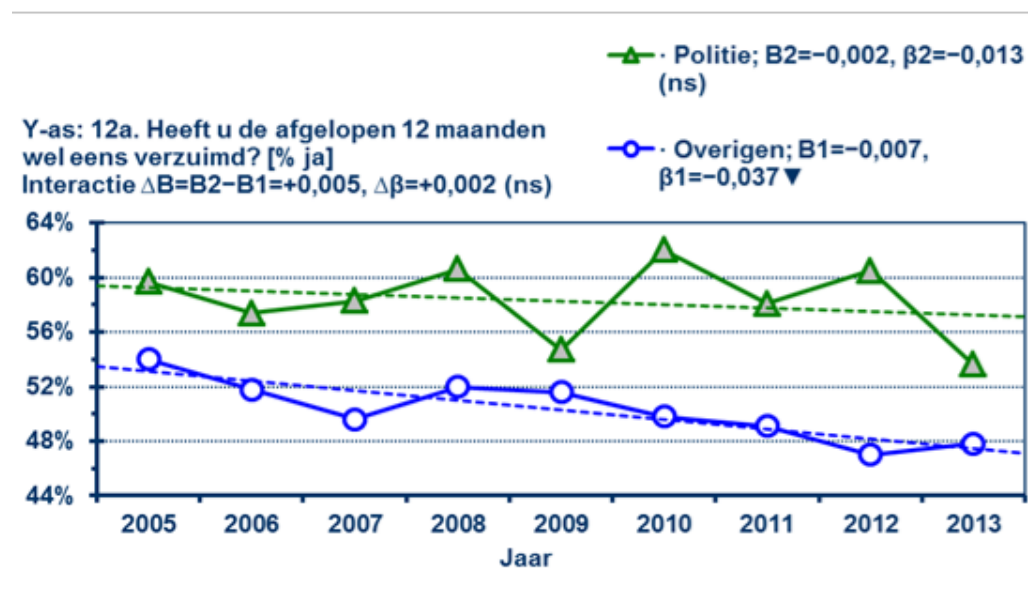


Figure 1.1 Frequency of absences for the police and other employees in the Netherlands. Source: NEA 2005 to 2013 (from Huis et al., 2014, p.1)²

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Y axis: 12a. Have you been absent at all during the past 12 months? [%]

The duration of absences within the police organisation is also relatively high. In the study conducted by TNO, around half of the National Police Organisation was examined (31,246 employees). Of those, 1280 employees were absent for longer than three months, which equates to 4.1% (Huis et al., 2014. p.15). The TNO study has revealed that the duration of the absence among this group of employees is just as long: the average absence is 420 days, in other words almost 14 months (p.44). The police's reintegration policy is therefore high on the agenda.

Literature about sustainable employability (Van Vuuren (2011), De Lange (2014), Brouwer, De Lange, Van der Mei, Wessels, Koolhaas, Bultmann, Van der Heijden, Van der Klink (2012)) draws attention to the importance of looking for people's capabilities and motivation for doing their work to the best of their ability. What's more, the fit between the individual and his or her working environment is essential for finding starting points for sustainable employability. In literature about reintegration, Coenen-Hanegraaf and Valkenburg (1998, 2012) combine both basic principles in the individual demand-driven approach. Whereas this approach originally developed with reintegration of people who were distanced from the labour market, it has also turned out to be useful in the context of people who are already working on the labour market (Beukema & Vd Vlist, 2001). Starting points form in this regard:

- prospects and motivations of people in the context in which they find themselves
- the individual as actor in his or her own process
- quality of the interaction
- reciprocity between individual and his or her environment (in this case, the work organisation).

On the one hand, reciprocity implies that employees are able to adapt to the organisation's rules and practices, and on the other hand, the organisation can try to meet employees' requirements and provide opportunities. Whenever the process deals with opportunities and motivations, this may enhance this individual's resilience. If the individual and the working environment also match well, this can cause a positive movement to get underway, which can be used to find points of reference for a suitable reintegration.

Sustainable employability within the police is influenced in a specific manner by the nature of the work. Police work can be drastic for the people 'in blue': situations in which they face violent incidents (domestic violence, discovering dead bodies, disturbances of the peace etc.) are now par for the course. Van Beek et al. (2013) have ascertained that police officers demonstrate high levels of commitment compared to similar groups (such as the military police, prison workers and police employees abroad), and that the work situation on average does not have any obvious adverse effects on psychosocial health. Police employees in the Netherlands don't deviate too much from the aforementioned comparison groups when it comes to mental health. This positive image of the average police employee does not deter from the fact that a study about the period between 1989 and 1994 revealed that in the Netherlands, five to seven

percent of police staff developed post-traumatic stress disorder after experiencing radical or traumatic incidents (Carlier, Lamberts & Gersons, 1994, in: Smit et al., 2013). So far, the issue of PTSD has mainly been investigated in a quantitative manner based on the effectiveness of treatment (Smit et al., 2013) and from the perspective of the psychosocial health of police employees (Van Beek et al., 2013). Dealing with this phenomenon in the police organisation itself has been largely overlooked so far, whereas Van Velden et al. (2012), on the basis of an extensive literature study, draw attention to the importance of organisational causes of stress such as work-related pressure, conflicts, reorganisations etc. when developing PTSD – which is why we have explicitly included the issue of PTSD in the study.

Research strategy and design

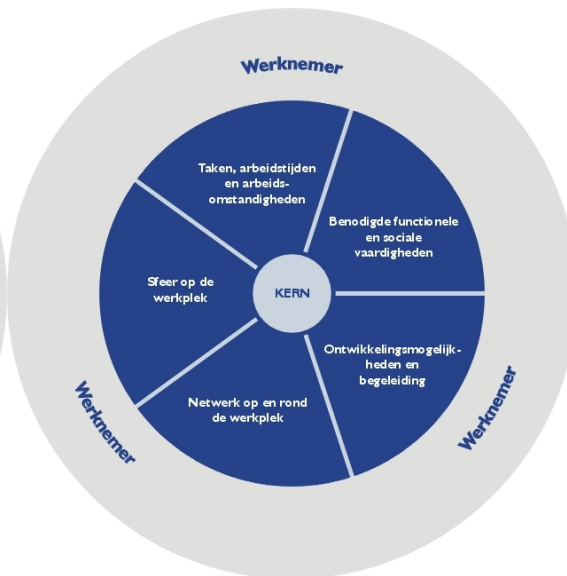
Action research was the research strategy we employed (Coenen, 2012), in other words, people's actions are at the core: what happened before a person becomes ill, what factors resulted in the absence, how do the different people involved act during the period of reintegration? Just by considering people's actions we can reveal everyday goings-on within the organisation. By studying those actions and their significance for individual and organisation, you can get a concrete idea of points of reference for effective reintegration processes in the event of long-term absence.

Those starting points lie in the 'basic act patterns' in the interaction between individuals and the organisation. A basic act pattern means the way in which people (re)produce the organisation in their day-to-day actions in interaction with other people. People are unique and make their own contribution to the goings-on within the organisation in their own way. At the same time, the organisation has certain frameworks, routines, relationships etc. that play a part in guiding that individual action. This implies reciprocity in the relationship between individual and organisation, in other words, each individual story also contains that (part of) organisation's story. The organisation therefore can learn more than enough from the (sum of) individual stories.

When collecting data, we took individual sense making as starting point and a narrative approach, so that the work-absence-reintegration process could be mapped out based on its meaning for those who find themselves in an absenteeism situation. What's more, we also looked at actions and reactions when changes were proposed and/or implemented. The employee's so-called 'flywheel' (Coenen-Hanegraaf & Valkenburg, 2012; Beukema, 2015) from the individual demand-driven approach was used in the pilot to start looking for the core or motivations of the person with his or her basic patterns. The employee's core is in keeping with the employee's intrinsic motivation. In other words: if a solution is found that is in keeping with the motivations a person has for his or her work, a flywheel can be set in motion that may cause a positive spiral. The outermost edge of the flywheel represents the environment in which the employee works; in this pilot: the Dutch police organisation. After all, it's all about mapping out the employee's development opportunities in relation to the police organisation. This context is visualised in the "workplace's" flywheel.



Employee flywheel³



Workplace flywheel⁴

Storytellers

Nine cases were included in the study. Conversational partners (story tellers) were selected at random, namely by questioning the five units concerned. This questioning was stopped when there were 12 names, who were approached in the order in which they arrived, but three people stopped participating because they found it a major burden. Of the nine story tellers, three had PTSD when their absenteeism started, one person's absence was caused by a work-related accident, three people had physical complaints that weren't directly work-related and for two people, burn-out complaints caused the absenteeism. Afterwards it was possible to make a comparison with the TNO report (Huis et al., 2014), which revealed that in the pilot, respondents who had physical causes for their absences are represented somewhat less (four out of the nine versus 50% of the files analysed by TNO). Psychological causes of absenteeism are therefore somewhat over-represented. The diagnosis of PTSD in particular is more heavily represented (three out of the nine story tellers versus 7.5% of the files analysed by TNO).

³ Requirements, motives and real perspectives

Skills, factors found in the individual

Learning

Social background and networks

Atmosphere and personality

CORE

Context: workplace

⁴ Responsibilities, working hours and working conditions

Necessary functional and social skills

Development opportunities and supervision/coaching

Network in and around the workplace

Atmosphere in the workplace

Context: employee

Privacy was essential to this pilot. The storytellers collaborated on the pilot voluntarily and didn't require their line managers' consent. It was up to them whether or not they wanted to notify their line managers of this. The stories recorded in the report were passed on to the participants. They all gave their consent to insert it in this way. If the discussions revealed that it was possible to adopt a favourable approach, the employee in question was able to do this via his or her line manager. If other things were necessary to arrange this in the context of this issue, the project manager of the pilot began to see how this could be achieved.

Collecting and analysing data

At least one and in most cases two conversations were held per person. The flywheels formed the basis for asking questions. The questions in the flywheel were not simply "ticked off"; rather they can be seen as a guideline/relief structure for the conversation. The conversation was recorded and transcribed with the consent of the employee in question. Should a second conversation be necessary to reach the next step, this was included too and transcribed.

The informative discussion was followed by a collective analysis of the transcript with the group of conversational partners leaders from the pilot, consisting of eight coaches affiliated with the police. We discussed central themes of the employee concerned and asked ourselves what are leitmotifs running through the themes of all the conversations that have taken place. Once this analysis was complete, we returned to the storyteller. Questions that arose are: Do we have the right analysis? Have we forgotten anything important? Additional questions were asked if necessary. This feedback was sometimes given by e-mail or telephone, and sometimes in real life.

Where possible, there was an idea for a potential approach and the aim was for the storyteller to actually take steps too. For the pilot, the question then was: did the action help to enhance the storyteller's resilience? What helped and what didn't?

The nine stories are stories of individual police employees. We therefore named a number of basic patterns for each person that were of real influence for dealing with absenteeism for the interaction between that individual and the organisation. Based on this, we paid attention to the similarities we were able to find in those individual basic patterns, gaining an insight into basic patterns that are important to the organisation as a whole when tackling absenteeism.

Results

Crux of the matter

At individual level, the storytellers' motives for working for the police are, of course, diverse, because each one is individual. Yet an important motive for police work springs

from this because it is named by almost all of the storytellers: meaning something to people.

"Don't forget, once you have been infected with the virus once, you will never get rid of the sense of justice that goes with it ever again. "

"By secondary school, I already knew that I wanted to join the police force, ...as I found the action appealing. The fact that you can make a small difference in difficult situations too, such as when imparting bad news.... that's when you matter to people."

"I still like the police organisation, I still love the work that the police does....

Standing in the middle of society, you can really make a difference for people."

Based on this motive, several people have explicitly named the importance of craftsmanship as an important motivation for their work. People are very closely committed to that profession and are looking for the scope to implement it in a personal manner.

"One time it might be writing tickets and another mediating... I always try to work in a people-oriented manner. When I write out a ticket, I explain why we're doing it."

"Over the years, I have seen rather a lot of community police officers come and go and I have also supported them rather a lot in order take steps at any given moment... That means that at a given moment, you have a certain obligation in relation to the content of your work."

This works in different ways. Recognition and appreciation by line managers and colleagues has turned out to be essential to everyone. If that recognition is missing, it is soon taken personally. For older police officers in particular, it is regrettable that rather a lot of changes have occurred in the way in which they are able to do their work: less with people, and with greater standardisation and administration. Whatever they have identified with no longer applies, they feel attacked in their sense of justice and that can cause uncertainty and frustration.

When it comes to starting points for launching a positive development, we see three scenarios in the individual stories:

1. In two cases, the employee and organisation are working together to make the employee's return to work adequate. We can see this in someone where she and her line manager have found alternative work at a proper level in mutual consultation with each other. We have also observed this recently in another person where the line manager has learnt all about PTSD and the storyteller (with support from his network) says where he would preferably want to end up.
2. In three cases, we can see people taking the initiative to develop and the organisation facilitates this, but adopts a passive stance in the process itself. One person is following a study programme and hopes that it will widen his perspective. Two others have found new places to work which is permitted by their line managers as long as there are no formal complaints.

3. In four cases, we can see that the organisation isn't focusing on developing people and sometimes doesn't facilitate them in finding a solution to their situation. A new position is available for a storyteller, but a number of regulations are getting in the way that line managers are struggling to put to the side. Someone else is only offered what he believes to be a suitable position once in eight years, which stops again when the line manager in question leaves. And two people say that they are not being helped by the organisation in their sickness process and sometimes they experience line managers (intentionally or unintentionally) even making the sickness process harder.

Basic act patterns

We have found five themes that transcend the individual level and are important when tackling long-term absenteeism. These themes have turned out to be leading in the way in which people deal with long-term absenteeism together in their everyday practice in the context of the police organisation. At the same time, the state of affairs found with these themes in the actions of individual actors is constantly being reproduced; only occasionally it has been possible to break existing routines and find new ways of doing things. These themes are:

Preventing broken relationships.

All of the stories have revealed the importance of reciprocal communication in relation to absenteeism. That is the case in a positive sense (for example, a superior who can see that something isn't going well, a line manager who takes the trouble to learn about PTSD, someone who prepares extensively for a meeting with his line manager and company doctor).

"I had written my own report and plan of action and was well prepared. I told my entire story, what steps I had taken to aid my own recovery and how I regarded my reintegration. For the first time whilst working for the police, I received compliments from the occupational health and safety (ARBO) doctor and was told by the representative of the HRM department, that they had never witnessed this before – which served to strengthen me further."

It also forms the crux of many of the stories in a negative sense. People feel they have been left in the lurch, believe they haven't had enough opportunities to reintegrate, are suspicious etc. Communication is sometimes absent here, indirect, with different frequencies and not always with sufficient amount of respect.

Someone whose manager terminated confidence explains:

"When I arrived after six months of absence, for example... and I had to go all the way down the corridor to my line manager. And it is actually true, I came out of the lift, entered the corridor and saw at least five or six people standing and chatting in the corridor. And they looked at me.... and no truth of a lie, they all fled to their rooms, and no one stopped to ask me how I was. No one!"

"I spent four months at home without even being contacted once. Nothing."

Arbitrariness in reintegration.

Communication right from the start of the absence is necessary to achieve a systematic approach, but the last quotation reveals that this isn't always the case. And this isn't a one-off: several storytellers explain that they are not always able to follow the normal process when it comes to reintegration. What's more, regulations were followed randomly in a considerable number of stories and people felt left to their own devices.

"And now I am looking for all kinds of jobs myself and next week I will go and look in a different unit, where I am in demand, because I know an awful lot of people, of course."

"I therefore had to arrange that entire process of reintegrating, operating again and reintegrating again myself. The place of reintegration, when I began to reintegrate, the duration of the reintegration, everything."

Lack of familiarity with PTSD.

Within Politie Nederland, the amount of attention paid to PTSD has increased significantly over the past few years. In one of the stories, both colleagues and line managers were aware of PTSD early on. Once colleagues had spotted her situation, they would meet with their line manager.

"He said, sweetie, I already saw it in your eyes. And then I felt something along the lines of oohh, pffff, how nice!.... And then, it was brilliant, I was removed from my stand-in position straight away and did a wonderful replacement project, which also gave me plenty of responsibility."

A number of stories of people struggling with PTSD clearly indicate that sufficient knowledge and attention is not a superfluous luxury. That applies to both the person who has PTSD and for his or her (working) environment. A story teller has placed his hope in a new line manager and prepares well for the meeting with him, together with his psychologist and the union's social representative:

"The aim was to let them know what is currently going on in my case... but in particular to make a plan of action, which was necessary, because nothing had been arranged..... I briefly told him about my experience and what I was working on. As the conversation progressed, he became quieter and quieter.. He also said that he was greatly impressed."

PTSD grabs deep into the personal lives of people, but also of their environment, which turned out to be of major importance when looking for ways to reintegrate. The wife of a storyteller says that someone from welfare staff called her and she initially thought it was about her well-being.

"At a given moment, I felt that the conversation was getting one-sided and that they were starting to ask me all kinds of things about my husband, and I didn't like that. I didn't like that at all... Then I was simply really angry too. But also the disappointment of gee, someone asking me something. But no!"

Dealing with diversity.

Police work is teamwork, whereby people work together based on trust. The corresponding group processes seem to offer scope to people who 'fit the bill', but less to people who deviate somewhat from the norm (see also Van Poeijer, 2011). In a number of stories, it is becoming clear that as you satisfy the profile of the 'average police officer' less, you feel rather excluded. One person explains how he was offered a three-day communication course when he requested a course for expanding his horizon:

"Because they said: you can't communicate properly....and I heard that reproach later too, so there is obviously an element of truth in this. But then, if you think that you can teach someone to communicate within three days, that's not going to work."

Another person felt that his abilities are being ignored:

"In my eyes, I was still able to do so much. And I suggested this along the lines of a think tank or development or teaching or whatever. But I was kept away from all of it."

Attention to development.

Work-related development appears to play an important role for the story-tellers. This is not only the case in the above quotation. Even if people have more opportunities than their position offers them, frustration about this can contribute to the development of absenteeism.

"I am in a junior position. I applied four or five times for a slightly higher position and I was always turned down for them, because I didn't have the qualities they were looking for. I once asked: have you read my CV? Yes, they had...Not really, no, not yet. They still don't know everything I've done."

But even in the event of reintegration, it seems beneficial when development continues to be a point for attention in the work. Work at the right level is very important:

"I don't have a nice job now, but rather a pastime."

"I am happy to have my study.... and once this whole thing is over, I will start to look for something to follow on from my course."

Conclusions and discussion

In general, achieving an adequate balance for both parties between rights and obligations in relation to long-term absenteeism is a question that demands an open dialogue ('a good conversation'). It is important for both parties to ask themselves how that balance can be achieved in order to be able to talk about it frankly. It's not about covering up differences of opinion or interests, but about making them transparent. Resources belonging to line managers (as representatives of the organisation) are greater than those struggling with absenteeism and often found in a vulnerable situation. Recognizing this difference in position is crucial for being able to start a good dialogue. That means understanding the other person's position, his or her value for the organisation and his or her perception of sickness or stress. A dialogue demands of the

employee to pay reasonable comprehension of his or her own situation, handling it as actively as possible, trusting his or her line manager and – when trust is broken - is open enough to broach the subject. The organisation then offers the opportunity to look for an alternative point of contact.

The stories from this pilot show the absence of these starting points relatively often. The discussion about these starting points in the organisations seems to demand a cultural change, but can in itself also be seen as the starting point to this shift in culture.

In the conclusions, we talk about provisional answers to the questions asked because, based on nine stories, it is of course difficult to make general verdicts about the police organisation as a whole. Yet it is worthwhile naming the common issues from the nine stories as start for a discussion within the organisation. The question then is: are these basic act patterns recognizable and complete for others? The members of the research group have also answered this question in the affirmative based on their own knowledge of and experience with the police organisation; all the more reason to submit the issues to other people. The TNO report (Huis, Houtman & Kallen, 2014) also backs this up. A number of corresponding conclusions can be found, in other words, of course. TNO also draws attention to a blurred distribution of roles and responsibility, of potential improvement in training and support of line managers in this field and specifically, on the problem of PTSD.

Sensemaking of their situation by people to whom this relates casts a lively and familiar light on the issue of long-term absenteeism, which is often deemed an abstract concept, as revealed from responses to the research report. The narrative approach is therefore a valuable addition to current research methods and in a pilot such as this, provides starting points for joint action by understanding important themes, in other words joint language that can be helpful when talking about approach and priorities. 'Files' become people and it becomes clear that an individual approach must go hand in hand with a joint approach by those concerned. For HRM staff, that opens up new opportunities for considering the issue of long-term absenteeism and taking the relationship between the individual and the organisation as a point for attention.

Recommendations for practice and HRM practice

From these general conclusions, we have reached a number of more specific recommendations that may play a role in the required discussion:

- When the absenteeism starts, it is necessary to discuss its cause and the steps that both parties can take to reach a solution. Insight into the different steps and the corresponding time frame can make the difference in time perception between those who are absent and the organisation. The Eligibility for Permanent Incapacity Benefit (Restrictions) Act (*Wet verbetering poortwachter*)

provides the starting points for a discussion such as this, because contact times have been specified in this Act. General knowledge about these steps is necessary, supplemented with knowledge about terms of employment related aspects of the absenteeism on the one hand, and dialogical conversation on the other. What's more, finding suitable replacement work (supplemented with partial reporting sick) aids recovery.

- Special attention requires dealing with PTSD. Information is necessary about how PTSD that is directly caused by the incidents experienced can be handled and how organisational sources of PTSD can be prevented. Attention to PTSD in the organisation is now on the increase, but more intense and specific information is required to prevent the sickness process from being strengthened by an ineffective treatment.
- In the case of long-term absenteeism, a major appeal is often made on the home front. In the stories, partners, as well as children, are involved in dealing with absenteeism. It is important to partners and children that the organisation pays attention to this involvement if they are to retain enough energy. What's more, a systematic approach can boost recovery and encourage return to work.
- In the context of this pilot, leadership is all about focusing on employee development, including on the development of those struggling with absenteeism. The following have turned out to be important: drawing attention to things in good time, facilitating replacement work at the required level, helping to think about future prospects. From the stories, the line manager's role appears crucial; a role that is not always tackled equally as adequately. It is important that line managers understand their own strong and weak points and delegate communication about absenteeism and recovery if necessary.

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