Leave continuity planning

A practical guide for business leaders, human resources, benefits managers, people managers and employees



Employee leave programs are a vital part of a healthy, supportive workplace. When an employee takes leave, the experience of the co-workers who cover for them matters just as much.

The 2025 Aflac Time Away Study shows that 59% of employees who were diagnosed with a new health condition while covering for a co-worker took three or more weeks of leave for self-care.

With the right plan in place, organizations can successfully support both the employee and the team members who are covering for them. This guide outlines what organizations can do to make leave coverage a positive, well-supported experience for everyone involved.

Business leaders, human resources and benefits managers

Building the foundation

The 2025 Aflac Time Away Study found that only 44% of organizations routinely follow their documented leave coverage process while another 44% see department-by-department variation. It showed a consistent, well-communicated plan can make a measurable difference for your employees.

1. Create and standardize your coverage process

Develop a written policy that clearly addresses how work is redistributed, who makes those decisions, how affected employees are notified and what resources are available to them. When every department follows the same approach, employees have a more equitable and predictable experience.

2. Close the awareness gap on support programs

Only 5% of leaders reported that their organization offers no support programs, yet 29% of employees said they received no additional support during a coverage period.

Make a habit of proactively communicating available resources, including flexible scheduling, remote work options, employee assistance program services and additional paid time off.

3. Think ahead about staffing

For extended leaves of nine or more weeks, the study showed notably higher rates of burnout and new health concerns among employees.

Evaluate early whether temporary staffing or workload rebalancing is warranted, rather than waiting until the team is already stretched.

4. Make recognition a policy, not an afterthought

The study found about half of Gen X and baby boomer employees received no recognition for covering a co-worker's leave.

Build recognition into the coverage process itself, ensuring it is applied consistently regardless of generation, department or manager preference.

5. Use data to drive improvement

Incorporate leave coverage questions into your existing engagement surveys to discover any inconsistencies across teams and leaders.



- Stay current on applicable leave laws in your state, including Paid Family and Medical Leave, Family and Medical Leave Act, Pregnant Workers Fairness Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- When laws change, treat it as a prompt to reevaluate your coverage plans. New or updated regulations often affect how leave is administered, who qualifies and what support employees are entitled to, making it an ideal time to audit your current approach and close any gaps.
- Use leave data to inform workforce planning. Tracking both planned and unplanned time away gives you a clearer picture of where coverage strain is most likely to occur, allowing you to build staffing strategies before gaps emerge rather than after.
- Review leave usage data consistently and in the context of emerging regulations. When combined with an awareness of shifting legal requirements, patterns in time away can reveal coverage vulnerabilities early and help you stay ahead of compliance and capacity issues.

People managers and team leaders

Supporting your team

The study found that 1 in 5 employees covering leaves for longer than eight weeks report extreme dissatisfaction with the support they received from their leader.

Managers have the greatest day-to-day influence on how their employees manage the extended leave period for one of their co-workers. Consistent, attentive management during these periods helps build trust and keep morale strong.

1. Communicate coverage plans clearly and early

The study found 51% of employees first learned about the plan in a team meeting.

Before the leave begins, bring the team together at least two weeks prior, if possible, to explain what is changing, who is responsible for what and how decisions will be made. Do not leave that communication to chance or to the employee heading out on leave.

2. Schedule weekly check-ins and stick to them

Set weekly calendar reminders to connect with your team at regular intervals throughout the leave period. These conversations signal that you are aware of the extra effort being made.

3. Watch for workload imbalances

Full-time salaried employees show the steepest declines in physical and mental well-being during coverage periods. If one person is absorbing more than their share, act quickly to rebalance or loop in human resources about staffing options before the situation becomes a bigger problem.

Mental well-being dropped 11 percentage points (71% to 60%) while covering for a co-worker, and physical well-being dropped 7 percentage points (72% to 65%).

4. Recognize contributions meaningfully and consistently

Verbal appreciation, a written note, a one-time bonus or extra paid time off are all effective. What matters most is that recognition happens, that it is timely and that it is applied equitably across the team regardless of tenure or seniority.

5. Prepare for the return as carefully as the departure

Set a reminder two to three weeks before the scheduled return date. Confirm the timeline, gather any needed documentation and plan a conversation with the returning employee to walk through current responsibilities and any changes that occurred during their absence. Encourage them to thank their co-workers for caring and covering their work.

Employees taking leave

Preparing for and returning from leave

When you take leave—whether for your own health, to care for a family member or for another reason—how you prepare and communicate can make a difference for both you and your team.

1. Provide as much notice as possible

When notice is given in advance, your manager and team can plan how work will be redistributed, identify any additional resources needed and maintain business continuity. Early planning helps reduce disruption for both your team and your customers.

2. Prepare in advance whenever you can

While some leaves are unexpected, take steps to organize your work whenever possible. Share the status of key projects, priorities and outstanding deliverables, and ensure important materials are stored in shared systems so others can access them if needed. In partnership with your manager, consider whether any work can be paused during your absence to reduce the impact on your team.

3. Communicate return plan changes promptly

If your return date changes or your leave is extended, notify your manager and any required stakeholders as soon as possible. Clear and timely communication allows your team to adjust coverage plans and identify any additional support needed.

4. Recognize your team's support when you return

In many cases, your responsibilities are temporarily absorbed by others. When you return, take time to thank your team for their support. A personal note, public acknowledgment or use of a formal recognition program can go a long way in showing appreciation.

Keep in mind



The study found that satisfaction with leader support is highest for shorter leaves and declines as coverage extends. The employees stepping up during a long absence need more engagement from leadership, not less. Consistent check-ins, recognition and promotion of resources throughout the coverage period are among the most effective things a manager can do.

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Source: 2025 Aflac Time Away Study. Data collected January 2025 from 1,000 employees and 500 benefits decision-makers.

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