

HIV/AIDS in the Barbados workplace: one company's dilemma – TEACHING NOTES

Case synopsis

The case centres around a food manufacturing plant, Caron Foods Inc. in Barbados. An employee in the Production plant has died of AIDS. The General Manager has to deal with the rumours and the fears of his employees before it escalates to the public arena and affects the viability and sustainability of the company. The case is put in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Barbados, providing general data on transmission, deaths and education/prevention initiatives.

Basic issue

The reason for using this case is to present a situation in which the learner has the opportunity to deal with real issues that emerge in an organisation when an employee dies of AIDS – fear, discrimination, stigma; as well as the consequences of prolonged illness(es) associated with HIV/AIDS - absenteeism, poor performance, loss of productivity, lack of support from staff and several others.

Teaching objectives

To identify some of the issues that managers are faced with when having to deal with HIV/AIDS in the workplace; and to develop strategies to deal with those issues.

- To develop an understanding of the issues related to HIV/AIDS in the workplace.

This case was written by Sue Lynch with supervision from Dr Richard Norman from Victoria University of Wellington at the Caribbean Case Course in Barbados, July 2004. It has been prepared to support class discussion of the case 2004-57.1. The use and circulation of teaching notes is restricted to accredited academics or other approved purposes.

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- To recognise the need to deal with the impact of HIV/AIDS on employee performance in organisations – absenteeism, poor performance and loss of productivity.
- To develop strategies for dealing with the impact of stigma and discrimination on an organisation's public image and sustainability.

Suggested student assignment

1. As the General Manager of Caron Foods, Inc. how would you have handled the issues of fear and rumour among staff?
2. How might you address the excessive sick leave of Maxine Cave?
3. If Maxine Cave had not resigned, how would you have dealt with the issue of having an employee who is HIV positive in your organization?
4. How would you deal with the issue of low morale and low productivity in the department as a result of Maxine's prolonged illness?
5. Would you discuss with the seven male employees the possibility that they may have contracted the disease?
6. How would you deal with the fears and concerns of customers if the news reached the public arena?
7. How are employees with HIV/AIDS protected legally in the workplace?
8. How would you deal with rumour that an employee has AIDS in your organisation?

Suggested additional reading

1. *Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work*, International Labour Organisation.
2. *Workplace Action on HIV/AIDS: Identifying and sharing best practice*.
3. *Status and Trends Analysis of the Caribbean HIV/AIDS Epidemic 1982 – 2002*, Barbados, [The Caribbean Epidemiological Centre (CAREC)]
4. *Dealing with AIDS in the Workplace: Guidelines for Managers and Supervisors*, The Barbados Employers Confederation
5. *Policy on Life Threatening Illness in the Workplace*, The Goddard Enterprises Ltd.
6. *The Changing Faces of AIDS*, Newsweek Health July 2004

Possible teaching aids

Video: "One of our Own"

A video which deals with a male employee working in an advertising agency who has contracted HIV and has agreed to disclose his status to his work colleagues. The video examines the different individuals in the workplace and their response to this news.

Case analysis

Analytical Dimension

The learner is required to analyse the situation, generate discussion and alternative responses, evaluate alternatives and make a decision.

1. The issues of fear, rumour and discrimination should have been addressed through education utilising the agencies in Barbados to assist.
2. The excessive sick leave should have been addressed through a coaching session after Maxine's return to work after her second bout of illness. This was the appropriate time to address the impact her absence was having on the department and on her co-workers. She should also have been given an opportunity to share information about her health/illness if she wanted to do so. If necessary, the company may want to have her assessed by the company's doctor as well to determine her fitness for work.
3. If Maxine had not chosen to resign, the GM should first find out from her whether she wanted to disclose her illness. He should also have provided support, modified work accommodation or whatever was necessary to accommodate her at work for as long as she was able to work. Education should also be provided to all other staff.
4. The issues of low morale and low productivity would have to be addressed through coaching, communication and education.
5. The GM should not discuss anything with the seven male employees since there was no evidence to support the rumour that Maxine was intimately involved with them. In addition, there may have been other males not identified.
6. The fears and concerns of the public regarding the possible contamination of food in the plant could only be allayed through education.
7. Currently there is no legislation in place in Barbados or the Caribbean to protect employees who are HIV-positive in organisations. The individual company can choose to deal with the situation as they see fit. This means that the employee has no legal recourse if she/he is dismissed from the company because of their HIV status. However, if the employee is wrongfully dismissed, according to Barbados' employment legislation, he/she can pursue action for wrongful dismissal.
8. Rumour needs to be dealt with through communication and education. It is imperative that once rumours start, employees should be provided with information on ways in which HIV/AIDS can be contracted at work, since co-workers who do not understand this are likely to perceive anyone living with HIV as a risk to them.

Conceptual dimension

The learner is required to use the case to apply a theory or concept with further reading or assistance or further discussion.

The theories/concepts may relate to:

1. "Why were there more HIV cases reported in 2003? Is it that the reporting has improved, more persons are coming forward to be tested or are the numbers simply increasing?"

2. “What could be done to prevent the public fear in cases of HIV infection in a food plant?”
3. “With the generally widespread availability of sophisticated anti-retroviral treatments, people with HIV/AIDS are living longer and returning to work as somewhat “healthy” individuals. What could be some of the challenges facing human resource managers and other managers with regard to confidentiality, work accommodation, work flexibility and fear and discrimination?”

Presentation dimension

This is a medium length case with some extraneous information.

Additional points to raise

1. What further needs to be done to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean, given that transmission is generally through heterosexual contact?
2. Due to the success of the anti-retroviral treatments, survival rates have improved. This means that there will be more employees with HIV/AIDS returning to work in organisations. What are the implications for managers and organisations?
3. What are your views on pre-employment medical testing?

Suggested time plan

30 minutes – Reading of the case

45 minutes – Group discussion and analysis of the case

60 minutes – Discussion in plenary session

Teaching suggestions

It may be useful to review some of the Suggested Additional Reading prior to the start of the case discussion in order to do a more effective analysis of the case.

Case teaching plan

Agenda:

1. Introduction
2. Introduction of the topic “HIV/AIDS in the Workplace”
3. Comments/questions from participants/students
4. Reading and discussion of the case - in groups
5. Assignment questions – (as stated in Suggested Student Assignment)
6. Plenary discussion of the case reviewing:

- The issues of the case
 - Analysis of the information
 - What alternative actions could have been taken?
 - How would you handle this dilemma as the manager of this food plant – Caron Foods, Inc?
7. Discussion of additional concepts and theories related to those mentioned in the case analysis above.