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Managing Unexpected Time Off Requests

Vicki sighs heavily, feeling as though she hasn't been able to catch her breath throughout the entire lunch rush. It's been a hectic day at her deli, and though she began it along with the opening crew, two of her employees scheduled for the evening shift have called in sick, and she might have to stay to help cover their absences.



The lobby is mostly empty of patrons now. Vicki wipes sweat from her brow with her wrist and is about to head back to her office when her mobile phone buzzes. She pulls it out of her back pocket, reads the text, and grumbles loudly. It's a message from Mary, her most senior employee and a longtime friend.

"I know it's last minute," the text reads, "but any chance I could get tomorrow off? And maybe tonight? Marcelino neglected to tell me until just now that he'll be home from college for the weekend. You know how he is. Please let me know."

Vicki wants to say yes, but she's already short two employees this evening and the weekend promises to be a busy one. The furniture store across the parking lot will be having a big sale, which always brings additional customers to her deli. Did she plan for that? She can't remember. Back in her office, she searches her messy desk for the schedule, mentally chastising herself for still using a hardcopy schedule she can never seem to find when she needs it.

A few minutes later, she's located the schedule on a counter in the kitchen. An employee must have grabbed it. Glancing at the weekend shifts, she notes that she had anticipated the weekend being extra busy. Good job, her! Unfortunately, she hadn't scheduled a large enough crew that she feels comfortable reducing tomorrow's headcount. To make matters worse, one of the employees who called in sick for tonight is also scheduled for tomorrow. Vicki lets out a deep sigh.

What to Do?

She considers her options. The simplest thing to do would be to deny the request and explain to Mary the reasoning behind her decision. Mary would understand, but would no doubt be disappointed. However, Vicki still needs to find replacements for the two sick employees. Maybe she could find one more. *I don't have time for this right now*, Vicki thinks, reflecting on all the things she wants to get done before the dinner rush. She feels irritated at Mary for this last-minute ask and at herself for not having a standard procedure in place for these situations.

Planning Ahead

In general, Vicki asks that her employees request time off before she makes the schedule for that week, and she tends to follow a first-come, first-served approach for vacation and personal day requests. But that's about the extent of her system, and she hasn't always been consistent in how she approves and denies time off requests. Consequently, her employees don't always know what to expect when making a request, and she sometimes feels like she's having to make decisions at the worst possible times.

Her system is tolerable most of the time, but it's inefficient and stressful. What could she be doing differently? Here's what we'd recommend in her situation:

- Establish a consistent process for submitting, approving, and communicating time off requests—including procedures to follow when employees ask to change their scheduled shift, especially with short notice. A consistent process helps ensure fairness and prevent discrimination. It also sets expectations, particularly for when requests are likely to be denied.
- As part of that process, delegate the work of finding a replacement when the reason for time off isn't an illness, injury, or protected leave. It would be fair for Vicki to ask Mary to find someone to cover her shifts. However, it's important that Vicki verifies that someone suitable has agreed to work for Mary so that if no one shows up, it's clear to Vicki who was supposed to be there. That brings us to our next suggestion.
- Use a scheduling app or otherwise post the upcoming schedules online. Vicki could save a lot of time and stress with a tool that enables her employees to request and volunteer for coverage and her to approve and document any changes.
- Communicate times when employees should not request vacation or personal days. Vicki's restaurant doesn't really have a busy season per se, but there are occasions—like furniture sales across the street—during which she could, as a rule, discourage or deny requests.
- Cross-train employees so more people can do more tasks. Vicki has done this well, and with few exceptions, most everyone on staff can take orders, work the registers, prepare food, deliver orders to waiting customers, clean dishes, and do the other odds and ends that need doing. While some of her employees prefer to do the same job each shift, the cross-training she's done does make it easier to find replacements when needed.

Pressed for time, Vicki decides to ask the staff currently working if any of them wants some extra hours this evening and tomorrow. To her relief, Bob and Rebecca volunteer. She'll have to pay Bob overtime, which she's not thrilled about, but she feels in this moment that it's an acceptable tradeoff to her spending additional time trying to reach out to others. She texts Mary back, telling her to enjoy the evening and weekend off. She then sets up a reminder for herself to figure out a better system.

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