

Is Your Unlimited PTO Program Quietly Failing?

A survey to get you an honest answer, and a roadmap to fix what it finds.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- 01** Why Unlimited PTO Programs Break Down
- 02** 6 Steps to Make Your Program Work Smarter (Not Harder)
- 03** The PTO Health Survey: Get Your Score
- 04** The Leadership Review: Questions That Drill Into Your Results
- 05** The Action Roadmap: Turn Findings Into Fixes

01 Why Unlimited PTO Programs Break Down

Unlimited PTO is designed to provide flexibility and improve employee well-being. Yet, when not executed correctly, it can create a whole new subset of issues. In some workplaces, employees take less time off because expectations are unclear. In others, managers apply the policy inconsistently, creating perceptions of favoritism or unfairness. Teams may also struggle with coverage planning, leading to resentment when workloads are redistributed unevenly.

THE REALITY

Unlimited PTO is less about the policy itself and more about how leaders and managers communicate and implement it.

02 6 Steps to Make Your Program Work Smarter (Not Harder)

1

Model it yourself.

The most direct way to signal the policy is real? Take time off yourself and disconnect while you're away. Leaders who model the same behaviors they encourage in others make it credible. Those who don't make it theoretical.

2

Give employees explicit guidelines on how to use it.

"Take what you need" isn't enough. Employees need to understand what's expected: how much notice, how requests get approved, what responsible use looks like.

3

Make sure workloads are manageable before and after absences.

Employees may avoid taking time off because they don't want to burden coworkers. If coverage planning is left to the individual, most will default to staying. Ensure workloads are manageable on both ends so employees can actually unplug without returning to an unmanageable situation.

4

Apply PTO practices consistently across your team.

Different managers may interpret the policy differently, creating frustration. If one team takes three-week vacations without a second thought while another gets pushback for a long weekend, employees will notice. Managers making decisions consistently is what turns a policy into a practice.

5

Evaluate performance based on results, not visibility or hours online.

Organizations often encourage time off while simultaneously rewarding constant availability. Those are contradictory signals and employees catch them quickly. If performance reviews favor whoever is most present, that's what people will optimize for.

6

Monitor whether employees are actually taking time away from work.

Many organizations fail to track utilization trends until the problem shows up in turnover. Pull the data quarterly. If people are taking less than they did under a traditional policy, that's worth investigating.

03 The PTO Health Survey

Distribute this survey to employees to get a temp check on the health of your PTO program and where there might be room for improvement. Employees rate each statement using the scale below.

1 Never	2 Rarely	3 Sometimes	4 Usually	5 Consistently
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STATEMENT	RATING
I feel comfortable requesting time off.	_____
My manager consistently supports PTO requests.	_____
The leaders of this company model healthy PTO usage.	_____
I feel like I can disconnect without being contacted.	_____
I feel like my workload is managed effectively during absences.	_____
I believe my manager’s PTO decisions are fair.	_____
I do not feel overwhelmed by taking on an absent colleague’s workload.	_____

Assessment Results

28-35	PTO culture appears healthy and well supported.
21-27	There are opportunities to improve consistency and communication.
14-20	Employees may be experiencing mixed messages or cultural barriers.
7-13	Significant management and culture concerns should be addressed.

04 The Leadership Review

Go over the survey responses with managers and HR stakeholders. Use these questions as prompts to drill down further.

1

If we interviewed employees today, how would they describe our PTO culture?

2

What behaviors are we unintentionally rewarding?

3

Do employees feel equally comfortable taking time off across every department?

4

If someone took two uninterrupted weeks off next month, would that be viewed as normal or unusual?

5

What is one improvement we could make this quarter to strengthen our PTO culture?

05 The Action Roadmap

Based on leadership conversations and employee feedback, create an actionable roadmap for change.

Top Opportunities for Improvement

- Clarify PTO expectations
- Improve coverage planning
- Increase manager consistency
- Encourage leaders to model PTO usage
- Improve workload distribution
- Reinforce disconnecting while away
- Other: _____

OPPORTUNITY IDENTIFIED	ACTION STEP	OWNER	DUE DATE

Key Takeaways

Unlimited PTO doesn't fail because employees can't be trusted. It fails when expectations are unclear, managers apply the policy differently, or employees believe taking time off will be viewed negatively.

The strongest unlimited PTO programs aren't built on generous policies. They're built on leaders who model healthy boundaries, communicate consistently, and create an environment where employees can truly unplug without guilt.

THE BOTTOM LINE

If employees are asking, "Is it okay if I take time off?" the conversation probably isn't about PTO. It's about culture.