



# **Presence Over Policy: A Manager's Guide to Employee Leave**

# A Note from Jen Henderson, CEO & Founder of Tilt

At Tilt, we've supported thousands of employees through some of the most meaningful, and most challenging, moments of their lives. And here's what we've learned:

Even the best HR teams can't do this alone. Managers play a pivotal role in the leave experience, not just in logistics, but in how supported, seen, and safe someone feels when they need to step away. And yet, managers are often left out of the loop, underprepared, or overly cautious. That's not just a miss, it's a risk.

We've seen what happens when things go wrong. A grieving employee returns to be asked how their "vacation" was. A returning parent discovers their major project reassigned without warning. These moments erode trust fast, and recovery is not easy, and often impossible.

We created this guide because we believe leave should be a moment of support, not stress. And we believe managers can absolutely be a force for good in that process, if they're given the right tools.

This isn't about making them experts. It's about making them prepared, with language, awareness, and confidence they can act on. Because how a manager shows up during leave has a lasting impact on culture, retention, and the employee's future with your company.

When you equip your people leaders, you turn intention into action — and policy into lived experience.

Let's get it right.

— Jen





# What You Need to Know About Leave — and Why It Matters

You don't need a law degree to support someone through a leave of absence, you just need to be present, prepared, and human.

Sometimes leave starts with a form. But more often, it starts with something only you notice: a change in behavior, a tough conversation, a quiet moment that signals something deeper.

That's why we created *The Manager Toolkit: 6 Things Every People Leader Should Know About Leave* — to help you navigate these moments with care, clarity, and confidence.

Use this guide:

- When you sense something might be going on
- When a team member mentions needing time away
- When someone is returning to work after a leave

It's not a policy manual, it's a practical, real-world resource to help you lead with empathy and consistency. Keep it close. Revisit it often. Because how you show up during leave can define someone's experience long after they come back.



# The Manager Toolkit: 7 Things Every People Leader Should Know About Leave

Leave is one of the most personal and pivotal moments in an employee's journey, and managers are often the first line of support.

You might not be the one writing the policy, but how you communicate, respond, and stay involved can shape the entire experience. And that experience matters: for the employee's trust, their wellbeing, and their future with your team.

This isn't about knowing every legal nuance, it's about knowing how to show up. Your leadership during leave isn't a side responsibility - it's a powerful opportunity to build connection, reinforce belonging, and help someone navigate a challenging chapter with dignity and support.

That's what this guide is for. Inside, you'll find:

- . What to say (and not say) when someone brings up a personal situation
- . How to recognize early signs that an employee may need leave
- . Tips for navigating communication while someone is away
- . How to create a smooth, respectful return-to-work experience
- . The actions that build trust, and the ones that quietly erode it

You don't have to get it perfect. But when you lead with intention, people notice, and they remember.

Let's walk through what every manager should know.

# 1. How to Spot a Leave-Qualifying Event

Not every leave request starts with, “I need a leave.” In fact, most don’t. Often, it begins with a shift in behavior, a comment in passing, or an emotional moment in a 1:1. As a manager, you could be the first person to notice when something’s going on, and you play a critical role in recognizing when it may be time to bring HR into the conversation. Here are a few signs to look out for:

- . A team member mentions a serious medical issue for themselves or a close family member
- . You hear about a pregnancy, upcoming adoption, or fertility treatments
- . Someone shares that they’re caring for an aging parent or a sick child
- . There’s been a death in the family or another major loss
- . The employee is attending frequent medical appointments or seems physically or emotionally overwhelmed
- . You observe a sustained change in energy, focus, or attendance without explanation

If you’re unsure whether the situation qualifies for protected leave (FMLA, ADA, state leave, etc.), that’s okay. Your role isn’t to diagnose or decide — it’s to recognize when support might be needed and loop in HR early so the employee can get the help they’re entitled to.

# 2. Set a Communication Plan for Leave

One of the biggest sources of tension during leave is misaligned expectations around communication. Some employees want regular updates to stay connected. Others need total space to focus on healing, grieving, caregiving, or adjusting to a major life change. You won’t know unless you ask. Start the conversation before the leave begins. Ask:

- “Do you want any updates while you’re out?”
- “Are there specific people you’d like to hear from, or avoid?”
- “How should we handle big changes or decisions that affect your role?”
- “Would you prefer a check-in at a certain point?”

Then document what’s agreed upon, and share it with HR or anyone else who might need to know (e.g., dotted-line leaders, team leads, direct reports). This protects the employee’s boundaries while giving you clarity on how to stay respectful and supportive. If anything changes during leave, check in gently:



*“I know we said no check-ins, and I’ll continue to respect that. Just letting you know we’re thinking of you — no need to reply.”*

Setting a communication plan doesn’t just protect time. It protects trust.

### 3. What to Say (and What Not To)

How you respond when someone brings up a potential leave matters, not just emotionally, but legally. The words you choose can shape how supported an employee feels and help protect everyone involved.

This chart offers quick guidance on what to say (and what to avoid) to keep the conversation compassionate, appropriate, and aligned with HR. Use it as a reference, and don't be afraid to reach out to HR for clarification.

 <b>Helpful Language</b>	 <b>What to Avoid</b>
“Thank you for letting me know. I’m here to support you however I can.”	“Are you sure you need that much time?”
“Let’s bring in HR — they’ll make sure everything goes smoothly.”	“This is going to be really hard for the team.”
“Take the time you need. We’ll keep things moving while you’re away.”	“Let me know what’s going on with your health.”
“When you’re ready, we’ll talk about how to make your return as smooth as possible.”	“I went through something similar, and I only needed a week.”
“Is there anything I can take off your plate while you step away?”	“We’ll try to hold off on big decisions until you’re back — but no promises.”
“Would you prefer to stay in touch while you’re out, or would you rather have some space?” (if appropriate)	“Just give me a heads-up when you’re ready to return.”

### 4. Be the Bridge, Not the Bottleneck

To support your team well, make sure you’re familiar with the resources your company provides for employees going on or returning from leave and know where to find them.

When you’re unsure, that’s okay. What matters is how you respond:

“I’m not sure, but I’ll find out for you.”

“Let me connect you with the right person on our HR team.”

Your role isn’t to handle every detail of a leave, it’s to help your employee feel supported and confident that a clear process is in place. You’re the bridge between your team and HR, and that bridge should feel strong, steady, and empathetic.

## 5. Reinforce Policies Without Sounding Robotic

Leave policies exist to protect both the employee and the company, but protection only works if everyone understands what those policies are and how they're applied. It's your job as a manager to communicate them in a way that's clear and consistent.

Employees should never be left guessing what they're entitled to, and they should always see that policies are followed equitably, no matter who's involved.

Don't say:

"That's handled by HR, not me."

Try this instead:

"We have a great process, and if you'd like, I can walk through it with you or connect you directly with HR."

Your words carry weight. Be clear, be consistent and always lead with care.

## 6. Stay Engaged—The Right Way

While someone is on leave:

Follow the communication plan you've aligned on with the employee and HR. Boundaries during leave are not one-size-fits-all and some employees prefer no contact at all, while others may want occasional check-ins.

- . Don't check in unless it's been clearly agreed upon.
- . Respect their boundaries and their need for space.
- . If you do reach out, keep it warm, personal, and not about work.

When they return:

Your approach on day one back matters more than you might think. A thoughtful return can help reestablish trust, belonging, and stability.

- . Genuinely welcome them back and acknowledge the time they've been away.
- . Use the re-onboarding plan as your guide for a smooth, respectful handoff of responsibilities.
- . Remember: how you show up in this moment shapes not just the employee's experience, but the message you send to the rest of your team about how leave is supported.

"We've seen companies take the posture of risk aversion to the point of excluding the manager from a leave conversation — which is always damaging, always... Managers absolutely play the most powerful role in a successful leave."

-Jen Henderson, CEO of Tilt

## 7. You Shape Retention

How an employee experiences their leave in its entirety has a lasting impact on whether they choose to stay with your organization.

As their manager, your role isn't passive. You're a key part of that experience. The way you communicate, support transitions, and re-engage someone after leave sends a message about how much the company truly values them.

Here's what that looks like in action:

- . Respect their boundaries, but don't disappear - stick to the communication plan you set together.
- . Make sure they feel genuinely welcomed back, not like an afterthought.
- . Reinstate responsibilities thoughtfully, with input.
- . Acknowledge the life event they've been through, even a small gesture matters.

These aren't just nice-to-haves. They're proven drivers of retention. Employees who feel dismissed or disconnected during a leave are far more likely to disengage or leave altogether. But when you show that their absence didn't diminish their value, you help rebuild belonging and loyalty from day one.

### Help Lead the Way

You don't have to be a legal expert or have all the answers to support someone through a leave of absence. What matters most is that you show up consistently, respectfully, and with the awareness that leave is often one of the most vulnerable and defining times in an employee's career.

This guide was built to help you do just that.

Whether it's recognizing early signs of a leave-qualifying event, setting expectations, staying aligned during time away, or welcoming someone back with care - your actions carry weight. They shape how employees feel about their team, their future, and their place in the organization.

Use this toolkit as a foundation. Refer to it before conversations. Revisit it when you're unsure. And most importantly, remember that how you show up doesn't just influence how a leave goes, it helps determine whether someone comes back feeling supported, seen, and ready to stay.

Your leadership in these moments matters more than you think.



# Additional Resources for Managers

Supporting an employee through leave isn't one-size-fits-all. That's why we've created these customizable tools to help you prepare, communicate clearly, and manage the details with care before, during, and after a team member's leave.

Use these templates and worksheets to stay organized, keep things running smoothly, and ensure your employee feels supported every step of the way.

## **Available Downloads & Templates:**

### Communication Plan for Employee Leave

Set expectations, boundaries, and preferences around communication while someone is out.

### Coverage Planning Worksheet

Map out task ownership, interim responsibilities, and team support before leave begins.

### Sample Reboarding Plan Template

A customizable guide to help welcome your employee back and transition responsibilities thoughtfully.

### Manager Leave Checklist

A step-by-step guide for what to do before, during, and after an employee's leave.