This article is an anonymised Q&A based on the kinds of questions businesses often ask Tick HR. It's designed to be practical and readable so you can sense check your approach and spot where a quick policy update, manager conversation, or bit of documentation could save you time and stress later.

Note: The guidance below is general and should be applied to your specific circumstances.

Q1 "An employee is off sick a lot. When do I step in and what do I say?"

Start early, stay factual, and be consistent.

A good approach is:

- ✓ Hold a return-to-work conversation after each absence brief, supportive, consistent.
- ✓ Track absence patterns frequency, timing, reasons given.
- ✓ Use triggers to prompt a review meeting e.g., repeated short-term sickness, or a pattern that impacts the business.
- ✓ Meet to explore what's behind it: health issue, workplace stress, personal circumstances, or something else.
- ✓ Agree next steps in writing: support, expectations, review dates.

The key is to avoid two extremes: ignoring it until you're frustrated or jumping straight to a formal process without a fair review.

Q2 "Can I ask what's wrong when someone calls in sick?"

You can ask for enough information to manage the absence responsibly but keep it proportionate and respectful.

In practice, it's reasonable to ask:

- ✓ what type of illness it is at a high level
- ✓ whether they expect to be in tomorrow / how long they expect to be off
- ✓ whether any urgent work needs covering
- ✓ how and when they will update you

Avoid pushing for personal or sensitive medical detail. For longer or repeated absence, you can use a structured absence review process to explore support options appropriately.

Q3 "One manager is strict about absence and another is relaxed. It's causing friction, what do we do?"

This is a common SME issue, and it usually needs two fixes:

- ✓ A clear absence policy what employees must do, what managers will do every time
- ✓ Manager consistency a short briefing so everyone handles reporting, return to work conversations, and triggers the same way

Your best "quick win" is to standardise the basics:

- ✓ same reporting method and deadline
- ✓ return to work conversation after every absence
- ✓ the same trigger points for review

Consistency protects morale and reduces the risk of unfairness arguments later.

Q4 "What's the difference between a performance issue and a conduct issue?"

A simple rule of thumb:

- ✓ Performance = "can't" capability, skill, understanding, support needed
- ✓ Conduct = "won't" choices, behaviour, attitude, breaking rules

Examples:

- ✓ Missing targets because they weren't trained properly → performance
- ✓ Repeated lateness with no good reason after being spoken to → conduct
- ✓ Mistakes due to workload and unclear process → often performance/process
- ✓ Rudeness to colleagues or customers → conduct

Getting these right matters because it changes the conversation, the support you offer, and the process you follow.

Q5 "How do I manage poor performance without it becoming a formal 'thing'?"

Think in stages, and document lightly:

1 Informal conversation

Explain the gap between expectations and current results. Ask what's going on. Agree what "good" looks like.

2 Short improvement plan

Clear actions, support offered, and review dates e.g., two check-ins over 4 weeks. Confirm in an email.

3 Review and decide next steps

If improvement happens, acknowledge it and keep monitoring. If not, consider whether a more formal capability process is needed.

Most performance issues don't need drama, they need clarity, support, and follow-through.

Q6 "Do I really need an employee handbook if I only have 10–20 staff?"

It's strongly advisable.

A handbook helps you:

- ✓ set consistent expectations absence reporting, conduct, holiday requests
- ✓ reduce manager "freestyle"
- ✓ make onboarding smoother
- ✓ support fairness and transparency

It doesn't need to be huge. The most valuable sections for SMEs tend to be absence, holidays, conduct, performance, grievances, and basic workplace rules.

Q7 "What should I do when an employee raises a grievance informally?"

Treat it seriously, even if it's "just a chat".

A practical approach:

- ✓ listen without judgement
- ✓ clarify what the employee wants to happen
- ✓ check whether it can be resolved informally
- ✓ keep notes of what was raised and what you agreed
- ✓ if it's serious or repeated, consider moving to a formal grievance process

Employees often decide whether they trust you based on how you respond the first time they raise a concern.

Q8 "Can I change someone's hours or role because the business needs have changed?"

Be careful. Changing terms without agreement can create risk and damage trust.

A better approach is:

- check what the contract says and any flexibility clauses
- explain the business reason clearly
- consult with the employee and potentially the wider group if it affects several people
- confirm the agreed change in writing

Even when the business case is strong, how you handle the conversation matters.

Q9 "How do we handle flexible working requests fairly?"

Have a consistent process and avoid snap decisions.

Good practice includes:

- a clear request route how employees submit, what they include
- a consistent decision framework impact on service, workload, costs, performance, team coverage
- a meeting to discuss options
- written outcome and rationale

Fairness comes from applying the same structure to every request even when you think you already know the answer.

Q10 "What HR tasks should we stop 'winging' and systemise first?"

If you're choosing the first 3 areas to systemise, start with:

1 Absence management reporting rules + return to work conversations

2 Performance conversations simple improvement plans + review points

3 Basics in writing contracts, handbook, and key policies that match how you operate

These create immediate consistency and reduce the "people issue" fire drills.