

Safety Committees

How to Put One Together and Make It Work for Your Company

The presence of an active safety committee at a company is a strong indicator that the company has a culture that promotes safe and healthy behavior in employees. Such companies have strong support from their top management for the health and safety program. This support from the top management promotes the development of safety goals and employee accountability. When a safety culture is established, all employees and supervisors are held accountable for identifying potential hazards and correcting them before they result in accidents.

The safety committee can work to develop safety goals for the company. Through their actions and example they can develop and promote a safety culture. A well motivated safety committee gets employees involved. Once managers and employees buy into safety, a company will see decreased accident rates, turn-over, and absenteeism. Productivity often increases because processes tend to become more efficient when evaluated for hazard prevention.

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Benefits

A safety committee benefits a company in the following ways:

- Gets employees involved;
- Creates interest in health and safety;
- Educates employees and managers;
- Promotes cooperation and coordination between departments; and
- Promotes the exchange of ideas.

Putting A Committee Together

Top management should establish:

- The committee's purpose;
- Who will be on the committee;
- What authority the committee will have; and
- A procedure defining how the committee will operate.

Consider the following:

- Will the committee need a budget?
- How many members will the committee have? It is a good idea to have an even mix of managers, supervisors, and front line workers. It is also advisable to have representation from each department (ex. operations, maintenance, accounting, etc.). In general, committees with 5 to 8 members work best.
- How often will the committee meet and for how long? Ex. Monthly meetings for one hour and emergency meetings in the event of an accident or injury.
- Who will be the committee chairperson? The chairperson will be responsible for putting an agenda together for each meeting. They might also be responsible for mediating – keeping the committee on track and on schedule. Alternatively, a separate committee member could be appointed mediator.
- How long will each employee serve on the committee? This may depend on employee turn-over. Establish a rotation schedule so that only one or two members will be replaced each meeting.
- Should each department vote for a representative or should the department supervisor select?

- Will employees be rewarded or recognized for serving on the safety committee? This could be as simple as providing doughnuts and coffee at the meetings. Some companies have t-shirts made. Others give recognition certificates or plaques, or even restaurant gift certificates. In any case, this recognition should come directly from the owner or CEO of the company.
- What authority will the committee have to make changes? If top management approval is needed, what process will the committee have to go through?
- Who will cover for a committee member while they are attending meetings?
- Will there be attendance requirements?

Possible Committee Functions

Depending on the committee's size and experience, possible functions might include:

- Establishing company safety policies and practices;
- Conducting inspections and investigations;
- Creating a safety culture through promotion, education and motivation; and
- Identifying, analyzing, and fixing problems.

Suggested activities:

- Evaluate health and safety problems and develop cost-effective solutions that are then presented to top management;
- Conduct regular safety meetings with employees in their departments to discuss a particular issue or train on a specific topic;
- Conduct safety inspections in their departments, discuss with committee and recommend corrective actions;
- Develop safety policies and recommend changes to those policies as the safety culture takes hold;
- Investigate near misses, accidents, injuries, and illnesses to identify root causes and recommend preventive measures.

Additional Ideas for Success

Ensure the committee has visible support from top managers and department supervisors.

Managers show support by:

- Delegating authority to the safety committee to accomplish their goals;
- Allocating resources (time, money, manpower) needed to accomplish safety goals and correct identified deficiencies; and
- Recognizing the contributions of the safety committee.

Supervisors show support by:

- Ensuring their department representative attends committee meetings;
- Working with the committee to correct health and safety problems identified during routine audits or accident investigations;
- Allocating training time for health and safety topics;
- Contributing ideas for the committee to discuss; and
- Rewarding employees for doing their jobs safely and following established rules.

Set goals for the company, individual departments, and the committee. Track and record the committee's progress toward achieving these goals. Give an annual progress report to the entire company.

Ensure safety committee members have a genuine interest in the mission and goals established by top management. This is especially critical for the first committee appointees and their replacements. Once the committee is established, it may be possible to assign employees who don't show outward signs of commitment. If there is a particular employee who is resistant to buying-in to the safety program, asking them to join and contribute to the safety committee can be an excellent way to convert them. Employees who don't feel the company truly cares about safety are often times the same employees who have had injuries, accidents, or routinely break safety

rules to get the job done. Involving these employees in accident investigations and allowing them to learn about hazard prevention is a positive way to reinforce top management's safety message to them. When committee members and employees see that their safety efforts are getting a prompt response from top management, they realize that they can make a difference.

Ensure that safety committee members, as well as managers and supervisors, always set a good example in the work place. These are the people who always wear their personal protective equipment, follow established procedures, and look out for their co-workers.

Companies with long-term temporary workers might consider appointing a temporary worker representative on the committee. Temporary workers often receive less training and recognition on the job and are more likely to get injured or cause accidents as a result. Therefore, their input can be a valuable resource to the committee.

When forming a safety committee, the Chairperson is often the company safety officer. After the first year, it is a good idea to allow the committee to vote on a replacement Chairperson. Ideally, the safety officer's role will shift from being the person ultimately responsible for the safety program to a role as health and safety information resource. A company knows they have created a safety culture when top management, supervisors, and employees are all accountable for health and safety on the job.

Select one committee member to be the Mediator. The Mediator prevents the safety committee meeting from turning into a gripe session. They also keep the meeting on track and on time. The Mediator helps the Chairperson stick to the agenda and prevents the discussion from getting too far off the main topic.

Select one committee member to be the Secretary. The secretary will schedule

meetings and document and distribute the minutes to top management, supervisors, and employees.

Rotate the Chairperson, Mediator, and Secretary positions on an annual or biannual basis to allow several committee members the opportunity to gain experience and shoulder responsibility.

Recognize committee members' contributions in their performance reviews and in visible forums such as the company newsletter or annual celebrations (holiday parties, summer picnic, etc.).

Ensure that the maintenance supervisor has adequate resources to complete work requests from the safety committee. Many safety committee recommendations result in an increased workload for the maintenance department. Success of the committee therefore can depend heavily on the ability of the maintenance staff.

Potential Committee Activities

Review recent accidents, injuries, and illnesses for root causes. This would involve reviewing the OSHA 300 Log, Workers Compensation claims, and accidents that resulted in equipment damage. Based on the identified root causes, the committee can recommend changes to existing operating procedures, safety rules, and additional employee training.

Have committee members discuss "near misses" in their departments, those activities that could have resulted in an accident but didn't. Allow discussion for root causes and make recommendations for preventative actions.

Invite guest speakers to the meetings. If the company requires safety glasses or respirators, have a supplier come to the meeting to demonstrate new models and discuss costs and benefits of different types of gear. Invite a workers compensation loss control specialist to

provide quarterly updates to the committee on costs of recent injuries and return to work practices.

Choose one part of the facility to audit and have the committee go to that area and conduct the audit. Provide constructive criticism and positive feedback to the supervisor of that area.

Assign departmental audits to committee members who do not work in that department. Have them conduct the audits and report back their findings at the next safety committee meeting.

Organize a safety fair, wellness fair, or safety olympics to promote health and safety in the workplace.

Have the committee develop a safety awards program, review nominations for the awards, and select the winners. Have the owner, CEO, or top manager present the awards at a company-wide function.

Select a committee member to attend formal health and safety training outside the company. Have that person share what they've learned with the committee and their co-workers.

Review existing company practices and standard operating procedures. Revise the procedures to include safety practices.

Review and update the company health and safety manual to ensure all policies and procedures are company-specific, accurate, and easy to understand.

References:

- (1) www.osha.gov: "Creating a Safety Culture"
- (2) National Safety Council: "Safety Management Techniques", 1995