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FOUR KEYS TO SUCCESS

Effective safety committees

Are you tapping into workers' knowledge?

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"I had an uncle who was a timber faller for many years. After he retired, I remember him telling my father, 'I worked for this company for 35 years, and they hired me from the neck down. They could have had the rest if they'd just asked.'"

Mark E. Hurliman, a Certified Safety and Health Manager and program manager for Oregon OSHA's Voluntary Protection Program and Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program, shared his uncle's anecdote as an example of the potential lost when organizations do not use safety committees to involve employees in their safety programs. Front-line workers have the most experience with how a task is performed every day and can help identify hazards that others may overlook, Hurliman said, and safety committees allow organizations to tap into this knowledge "from the neck up."

Currently, not all organizations are required to have safety committees. However, employers meeting certain criteria in some states must establish a committee to help improve worker safety (see "Selection of state safety committee requirements" on p. 57). Additionally, some states provide incentives – such as reductions in workers' compensation premiums – for organizations with established safety committees.

So, what characteristics make up an effective safety committee?

Committee size and structure

Safety committees range in size and structure based on the organization's number of employees, worksites and hazards present, but certain arrangements have been found to be more effective. According to a 2008 study published in the journal *New Solutions* (Vol. 18, No. 4), organizations that

Key points

- Research has shown that organizations with a higher percentage of its workforce on safety committees have lower injury and illness rates.
- Safety committees with strong and visible upper management support are more likely to make a meaningful impact on workplace safety.
- An effective safety committee leader is someone who can facilitate a meeting without dominating it or allowing others to, and encourages participation among all members.

had safety committees made up of more hourly workers than managers had lower injury and illness rates. Researchers also found that organizations with a higher percentage of their workforce on safety committees had better rates.

The Maine Department of Labor states that ideal safety committees have representation from all departments and shifts, as well as from both management and the labor force.

Ben Bloom is safety consultant principal for Minnesota OSHA. Bloom said many organizations that participate in the Minnesota STAR (MNSTAR) program – which recognizes organizations with safety and health systems that go above and beyond OSHA requirements – have multiple safety committees. Some organizations assign a committee to each area in the facility, such as the warehouse, production area and offices. Having multiple committees is a great way to involve more workers in an organization’s safety and health efforts, but clear guidelines or a centralized committee must be established to help prevent potential overlap, Bloom said.

Effective task delegation by a centralized committee allows a subcommittee to allocate more time and effort to a specific workplace problem. Dave Ferkul, workplace safety consultation supervisor for Minnesota OSHA, spoke of a nursing home that established multiple subcommittees to address specific issues related to staff and resident safety. One subcommittee focused on safe patient-handling equipment, and for fresh ideas they visited other nursing homes to seek out examples of alternative equipment. The subcommittee reported its findings to the central safety committee, with upper management present, and a resulting investment in new equipment reduced workplace injuries, Ferkul said.

Committee leaders and member participation

An effective committee leader can facilitate a meeting without dominating it or allowing someone else to do so, Ferkul said. Instead of dictating how a discussion should proceed – which is not conducive to member participation and feedback – committee chairs should focus on encouraging participation among all members, he added.

Effective committee heads also should establish basic ground rules and ensure meetings do not get out of control. Rick Long, safety lead of the Dillard, OR-based Roseburg Forest Products’ Dillard Plywood Division, described how his company used detailed agendas and time limits to turn around its approach to committee meetings.

In the late 1990s, safety committee meetings at the company usually became shouting matches between labor and management representatives, and would sometimes last four or more hours, Long said. In 1999, the company’s approach to safety committees evolved: Overly lengthy, unstructured meetings were replaced by streamlined meetings lasting one hour or less. Safety committee chairs were voted in by hourly employees and given control over each meeting’s agenda. Committee members also began voting on a written charter and flow-chart featuring each member and their responsibilities.

“Basically, we learned how to use agendas, how to stay on track and stay on time,” Long said. “If there was an outstanding issue we couldn’t agree on, we learned to ‘put them in the parking lot’ and revisit [at] the next meeting.”

As a result, he said, employees and management feel they have equal say when it comes to safety, he said. “Everyone has a voice and is allowed to speak it, as long as they do it respectfully.”

Enthusiasm

Safety committees may struggle with maintaining member enthusiasm over time. Tim Morse, professor emeritus for the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington, recommends the following techniques to prevent or address committee member burnout:

- Rotate the committee's focus among a variety of topics, such as ergonomics for a period of time, followed by chemical hazard reduction, and so on.
- Bring in new committee members when the committee becomes stale. Also, periodically invite non-committee front-line workers to participate in a meeting and discuss any day-to-day hazards they encounter.
- Invite safety committees from similar organizations to visit and help identify hazards.

Management support

Tim Morse, professor emeritus for the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington, co-authored a report published in 2013 in the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* (Vol. 56, No. 2) that looked at common characteristics of effective safety committees. Researchers found that committees that made a meaningful impact on workplace safety had clear and visible upper management support. This allowed committees to secure funding or support to quickly address a safety hazard, another key trait of effective committees, Morse said. In addition, "larger committees are generally beneficial for both detecting problems and getting reality-based solutions," he said.

Management participation in meetings is important for the committee to make realistic decisions and recommendations, Ferkul said. Committee members need to see that their recommendations have an effect on workplace safety, and if too many are too costly or are never used, committee members' enthusiasm may decrease, he said.

Uncommunicative or unsupportive management reduces the effectiveness of committees, Bloom said. He remembers one worksite with a safety committee that did not receive updates from management on whether an identified safety hazard was being addressed. Management actually was making changes based on the recommendations, but lack of communication made the safety committee members feel as though their efforts were not valued, he said.

When employees see that safety is important to management, this can have a positive effect on their own safety values, said Ryan Nosan, state program administrative director for Minnesota OSHA. Management also can help stagnant safety committees make a turnaround.

"Effective support from upper management goes a long way," Nosan said. "Seeing management in attendance and active participants in the safety committee's activities is a powerful tool."

Committees and safety culture

Safety professionals can benefit in many ways from the information generated from a committee containing front-line employees. However, Hurliman advised against safety professionals taking too active of a role. “[That] takes away the creativity of the group,” he said. “You really want to let [employees] step forward.” Instead, he said, safety professionals should behave more as a coach and resource to the group.

Nosan recalled a worksite that initiated a committee-led behavior-based safety program. A safety supervisor attended the meetings to help coordinate management support, but otherwise the committee was entirely employee-led. The enthusiasm of the group led to significant ergonomics-related changes throughout the facility, he said.

For safety professionals struggling to establish a safety culture at their organization, safety committees can help, Hurliman said.

“Employee involvement is how employers can get their safety cultures to be bought into. How they really make a lasting impact in safety and health is by getting people involved,” he said. “Some of the things I have seen safety committees do have been just incredible, because the employer is allowing the employees to start driving aspects of the safety programs. Once that happens, I tell employers, ‘Hang on, you’re going for a ride. They’re going to take you to places you didn’t believe you could get to.’”

Selection of state safety committee requirements

The table below is a selection of states that, at press time, require some type of safety committee, and a summary of the state’s requirements. Please view the associated links for more detailed information on a state’s requirements.

In addition to this list, states not included may have mandatory safety committee requirements for certain industries, sectors or organizations using specific work processes. These states also may offer incentives such as reduced workers’ compensation premiums or reduced violation penalties.

To ensure your organization is compliant with your state’s safety committee requirements, contact your Department of Labor, local OSHA office, workers’ compensation board or other applicable agency.

STATE	SUMMARY OF COMMITTEE REQUIREMENTS	LAW LINK
Alabama	All employers subject to workers’ compensation rules must establish a safety committee upon the written request of any employee. The requirement may be different for employers with a collective bargaining agreement with employees.	
California	Safety committees can be used to fulfill a requirement of the state’s mandatory injury and illness prevention program.	
Connecticut	All employers with 25 or more employees, and employers whose rate of injury or illness exceeds the average OSHA recordable injury and illness rates of all industries in the state, must establish safety committees.	
Maine	Employers must establish a safety committee if their workers’ compensation insurance is through an association or group of employers.	
Michigan	Organizations using highly hazardous chemical processes may be required to have a safety committee.	
Minnesota	All employers with 25 or more employees; smaller employers with A) a lost workday cases incidence rate in the top 10 percent of their industry, or B) a workers’ compensation premium within top 25 percent of all employers in state, must establish safety committees.	

		
Montana	All employers with more than five employees must establish safety committees.	
Nebraska	All public and private sector employers that are subject to the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Act must establish safety committees.	
Nevada	All employers with more than 25 employees, or employers that manufacture explosives, must establish safety committees.	
New Hampshire	As of Jan. 1, 2013, all employers with 15 or more employees must establish a "joint loss management committee" comprising an equal number of employer and employee representatives.	
North Carolina	All employers with 11 or more employees, not counting temporary employees, with an insurance experience rate modifier of 1.5 or greater must establish safety committees.	
Oregon	Every employer must have safety meetings or a safety committee. If an employer has more than 10 employees in one location, it must have a safety committee. Other considerations apply for the construction, agriculture and logging industries.	
Tennessee	All private and public employers subject to the workers' compensation law with an insurance experience modification factor greater than or equal to 1.2 showing higher risk of worker injuries must establish safety committees.	
Vermont	Voluntary Protection Program companies must use safety committees, and they are recommended for all other employers.	
Washington	All employers that employ 11 or more employees on the same shift at the same location must establish safety committees.	
West Virginia	The West Virginia Worker's Compensation Commission establishes the criteria for when an employer must establish a safety committee, such as if an employer's experience modification factor exceeds a certain threshold established by the commission.	

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