

Safety Committees

Safety committees are a key part of safety in the workplace. They accomplish several things:

- **Central focus.** Committees which represent all functions or departments allow the organization to take an overall look at safety requirements and to foresee problems that might otherwise cause difficulties.
- **Sounding board.** The committee is a visible and approachable body for safety or health complaints, suggestions, and the like.
- **Central coordination.** With management direction, much of the coordination of safety training activities can be accomplished by the safety committee.

Management has the ultimate responsibilities for safety and health. Through its managers and supervisors it establishes the program and enforces safety rules. But the safety committee can have an important role in assisting supervisors with the success of that program.

An effective safety committee encourages safety awareness, gets a large number of employees actively involved in the safety program over time, helps motivate employees to follow sound safety practices. An effective employee safety structure provides a feedback mechanism to identify and correct new safety hazards at the earliest stage. Once the safety committee structure is in place and working well, it is a natural vehicle for employee involvement, preparation and introduction of new safety rules, new preventative practices, and safety procedures on new equipment.

All organizations should think through the role of their safety committee, including:

- what the responsibilities and duties of the committee are
- how the committee helps management to enforce safety rules
- how to report unsafe conditions and acts
- how to handle safety suggestions
- how to conduct safety inspections or tours
- what the committee should not do.

Be sure to spend time organizing the committee carefully. A safety committee left to its own devices will contribute little to the local safety effort. Ideals and good motivation lose luster quickly if the specific role of the safety committee in the safety and health program is not clearly defined.

What role should your safety committee have? This will vary from company to company or from site to site. Here are elements to consider:

- **Set a good example.** Committee members must set a good example! Committee members must be above average in their safe work habits and their positive attitude about safety.
- **Be visible.** Names of safety committee members should be posted prominently in their departments. They are the strong right hand to supervisors. Some companies also give safety committee badges to identify their committee members.

- **Report unsafe conditions.** What will the committee's role be in reporting unsafe machinery and conditions and hazardous acts? This will vary, depending on the size of your location, the number of departments, and your organization's philosophy and policy.

For some organizations, safety committee members will report unsafe acts and conditions directly to their immediate supervisor, the most usual and most effective way. At other sites, the manager may have an "open door policy" inviting safety members to come to him or her with their suggestions. At other places, the committee members write up safety notices or reports and give them to the safety committee for action by management. Whatever system you use, train your safety committee members in what you want them to do—show them how you want them to carry out their duties.

- **Conduct safety inspections.** Many organizations utilize safety committee members to perform safety inspections or plant safety audits. This is a wise choice, for these are the people who know the work practices and the jobs on your site—and the inherent hazards in the work. They know the safe—and the unsafe—way to perform the jobs. But assigning safety committee members to do safety tours is only the start—training them in how to do the inspection task accurately and thoroughly is the next step.

Organizations who utilize safety committees effectively provide them with a checklist or audit form, usually sub-divided by department or work unit. The form allows the inspector to focus very specifically on unsafe conditions or unsafe acts. The best type of safety audit form usually comes from those organizations who have developed a Job Hazard Analysis for each job. These JHAs, if well done, give your safety auditors the key elements in every job—the unsafe practices, the dangerous conditions—you are likely to encounter on the job.

- **Investigate accidents.** Depending on your safety policy, you may want to utilize the safety committee to assist you in investigating accidents. At some locations the committee investigates all lost work day accidents and reports the findings and recommendations to management. For other organizations, safety members work jointly with supervisors to find the causes of accidents. At still other companies, the safety committee at its regular meetings reviews the results of supervisors' accident reports.

Whatever approach you take, be sure that the role of the committee in investigating accidents is made clear at the start and instruct the members in their role. It's good practice to investigate both Lost Work Day Cases as well as "near misses" and minor accidents which could have been more serious.

- **Hold regular meetings.** Safety committees must meet formally (usually at least once a quarter, sometimes biweekly), and for their meetings to be effective the following matters must be considered:

Frequency of meetings

Selection of chairperson and a secretary

A prepared agenda in advance of the meeting to:

- keep discussions on track
- allow members to prepare for the meeting
- serve as written documentation of efforts

- allow management to track efforts
- conduct safety training activities

Minutes:

- written summary of efforts
- names of attendees
- number of absentees
- responsibilities for implementation assigned
- timing of implementation assigned
- cost of implementation
- any approvals required
- completed recommendations
- uncompleted recommendations
- accident review
- safety training activities
- issued within 48 hours of the meeting

- **Sounding board.** Be a sounding board for safety and health activities. Positive management groups ask their safety committees to be sounding boards on proposals for new safety rules, developing the Job Hazard Analysis changes or additions to personal protective equipment, participate in safety fairs and safety victory days.

Developing and Training the Committee

Who can assist you in your efforts to develop and train the local Safety Committee? The main responsibility falls to Site Management who must conduct and set up the program. Yet there are others who can assist in this responsibility. These include:

- **Safety consultants.** Safety consultants, either from outside the firm or from your workers' compensation carrier. They can assist in your safety training by providing talks, slides, films—and above all his or her experiences with other effective safety programs.
- **Vendors.** Vendors who sell products to the company will be interested in enhancing their sales position by training in the use of their product or service. Typical vendors are fork lift truck distributors who will train employees in the safe operation of their equipment, chemical manufacturers who will be enthusiastic about training operators and mixers in the safe handling of new chemicals, and fire fighting equipment suppliers who welcome the chance to give plant personnel 'hands on' experience with their fire fighting equipment.

What the Committee Should Not Do

Assistance from the safety committee should be looked on as a positive assist to management in its responsibility for safety and health. That's why we have emphasized in this chapter the importance of deciding what you want the committee to do and training them in those duties.

That's why the training of safety committee members should be specific and tell them what you

do not want them to do. For example, safety committee members in some organizations are empowered to report unsafe acts to a supervisor or to stop unsafe work or equipment. In other companies, safety committee members must report such infractions to supervisors. A clear cut statement of the role of the committee members is very important, lest they cause dissension among their co-workers.

Job Description of an Effective Safety Committee Member

A Toronto packaging manufacturer encountered such confusion among its safety committee members that it developed an orientation program for newly-appointed safety committee members, including a Job Description of an Effective Safety Committee Member.

The concept of a "Job Description" was well known in this facility because the wage structure was tied in with job descriptions for each job.

That outline of duties reads like this:

Primary Function

To give your best efforts to make the department free from accidents and occupational health problems.

Duties

- Work safely yourself—set the example in the department.
- Attend and actively participate in safety committee meetings when on day or second shift. If you are on third shift, notify your supervisor so that your alternate can attend.
- Work with your supervisor to eliminate hazardous conditions and unsafe work practices in the department. Speak to your fellow employees if you believe that they are engaged in an unsafe work practice; report things which you feel you can't handle to your supervisor for further action.
- Investigate with your supervisor recordable case injuries which occur in your department. Participate in Plant Review Committee activities on Lost Work Day Case accidents or industrial illnesses in your department.
- Listen to employee suggestions about safety and bring those that appear to have merit to the department supervisor for review.
- Coordinate with your alternate to conduct department safety inspections in the first week of each month, using the pre-printed checklist as your guide. Each quarter participate with a plant management member in a facility wide safety audit.
- Before each plant safety meeting review minutes and open items affecting your department and have answers or a progress report on each item for the meeting.
- Wear your safety committee button at all times while at work.

The sample policy which follows includes the important elements that make a good policy—why the committee exists, who serves, and what its responsibilities are.