



SAFETY

10 Success Factors for Effective Safety Committees

Achieve to Their Fullest Potential | BY JEROME E. SPEAR

Safety committees are a common way to get employees involved in the safety process. Often, they are put together to assist with inspections and audits, review incidents and injuries, solicit suggestions to reduce injuries and illnesses or to conduct behavior observations. But, is the committee achieving its fullest potential? I suspect that the answer is no in many cases or that there are at least some ways in which the safety committee can improve.

Ultimately, safety committees that are formed haphazardly have sustainability problems. There are both assets and liabilities associated with forming committees, groups or other work teams. The assets include greater knowledge and experience, more approaches to problem solving and better implementation of the safety program. Potential liabilities include individual domination, conflicting alternative solutions, premature decisions and prior commitments of members. In many cases, little consideration is given to group and team dynamics when forming and implementing a safety committee. If you are designing a safety committee or reviving the safety committee at your work site, consider the following 10 success factors for effective safety committees.

1. Clear Direction. Successful safety committees have a clear understanding of purpose, why the group exists and what it is trying to accomplish. For example, one safety committee's stated mission is "...to continuously reduce the risk of injury and illness to employees and visitors at this facility. The committee will do so in a way that uses the organization's resources efficiently and will strive to achieve an optimal level of safety and health for the organization."

This statement of direction is clear and simple; it contains only a few objectives. But those objectives can allow the committee to make intelligent tradeoffs. When faced with a decision regarding whether an engineering control should be implemented or a safety procedure written, the statement invites the group to ask, "Does this action reduce the risk of injury or illnesses? Does it help us achieve an optimal level of safety? Is it feasible?"

The statement is clear about the group's purpose, but does not say how the committee should get there. Two common errors in setting direction are failing to set any direction at all and setting a direction that is all about means (i.e., the how) but that does not specify the end (i.e., the why).⁽¹⁾

2. Common Performance Goals. Common goals are critical to the committee's success. There should be no hidden agendas. For a goal to enhance performance, it has to be congruent with the committee's overall direction, challenging and completed by a specified deadline. Unlike the committee's statement of its overall purpose, goals should be specific descriptions of work the committee is to accomplish within a specific timeframe. Examples of some goals for a safety committee might include the following:

- Provide accident investigation training to all front-line supervisors by the end of the year.
- Conduct a risk assessment of all work tasks by risk of injury by the first quarter of the year.
- Prepare a job safety analysis for all high-risk activities performed at this location by the third quarter of the year.
- Complete a feasibility study of installing a local exhaust ventilation system in the welding shop by the second quarter of the year.

Management may provide the expected outcome of the group's effort; however, the group should determine how it will achieve these targets. Such goals and objectives should be reviewed frequently, and updated as necessary, during committee meetings periodically to measure the team's performance and reinforce the committee's direction.

3. Definition of Roles. Basic roles in the group include leader, facilitator and team members. In-house facilitators must be

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chosen with care, as replacing them can be debilitating to group dynamics. Outside facilitators are good if they already are known and have earned the respect of committee members on other projects. The advantage of outside facilitators is that it is easier and less traumatic to remove them if they prove to be unsuited for the committee.⁽²⁾

The role of the leader is most critical as the committee develops.⁽¹⁾ Initially, the leader assists with the design of the committee, provides clear direction as described above and helps the committee progress. Later, the leader acts as a coach and monitors the progress of the committee.

The role of each committee member must be clearly understood. Each member has unique attributes and should recognize why he or she was selected. These roles may or may not be formally defined, but they should, at least, be communicated to avoid duplication of effort and conflict. The leader may choose to discuss these roles individually with each member or lead a discussion with the group to ensure the roles are understood.

4. Real Committee Function. The basic elements of the work should require members to work together to complete significant tasks.⁽¹⁾ Spending time together as a whole is crucial. Often, I find a committee's primary function is to split up and conduct routine safety inspections (by department or area). One problem with this approach is that the task of simply performing a safety inspection usually can be done by one or two people, and does not require the work of the entire committee. Such tasks actually can be assigned to other employees to get more employees involved in the safety program.

A better use of the safety committee is for the committee to train employees on how to conduct the safety inspections. As trained employees conduct safety inspections, the committee then can review the inspection/audit findings, prioritize these findings by risk of injury, determine root causes and evaluate possible corrective actions.

5. Visible Management Support and Commitment. Members must perceive that management fully supports and is committed to the committee's efforts;

otherwise, committee members will lose dedication to their mission. Management should show interest visibly in the safety committee's activities and communicate a sense of urgency for the group's purpose. By doing so, members will be assured that the committee's purpose is aligned with the company's overall business strategy. As a result, an ambitious tone will be set.

Successful safety committees have a clear understanding of purpose, why the group exists and what it is trying to accomplish.

6. Mutual Responsibility and Group Accountability. One problem with a safety committee formed carelessly is that accountability may be lost. Therefore, the leader must determine prior to the formation of the committee, how it will be held accountable as a group. If substandard effort is produced, will the entire committee be replaced? Or, how will the group be recognized for performing outstanding work? The whole group must be held accountable for poor work or recognized for solving problems. Both outcomes must be expressed clearly by the leader, along with the potential consequences of poor performance.

7. Authority to Manage the Work. Having the authority to manage the committee's tasks most likely will lead to a self-managing safety committee. Such authority means that the committee, not the leader, has the authority to make decisions about basic committee functions.⁽¹⁾ If management or the leader intervene, the committee's sense of ownership for the work will be compromised. Instead, the leader should explicitly address the committee's authority and the boundaries. The committee should understand that the leader is available for consultation, but the ultimate decision-making

