

Safety Committees

Goal

This training program will give the employer the needed tools to create and maintain a safety committee.

Objectives

The objective of this publication is to show the benefits of having a safety committee. This program will set up some guidelines for size, use, and direction of the safety committee. It will also set some ground rules for keeping the committee active and productive over the long term.

Purpose of the safety committee

Establish an opportunity for workers to have their safety concerns addressed.

Give workers a say in the rules that will be implemented.

Empower workers with responsibilities and authority for safety improvements.

Involve workers in the processes and procedures that are instituted at the facility.

Open communication lines between management and hourly wage workers.

Benefits of having a safety committee

The safety committee is a tool that allows the workers to voice their concerns about safety issues without fear of criticism from their co-workers. These workers are the experts in the operations in their work areas and they will have a better understanding about their surroundings than a manager or safety specialist. This gives them a unique view of the hazards of their workspace. By allowing these workers to participate, the employer will gain useful information at minimal expense while giving the workers a sense of involvement and responsibility for the safety program. As members of the safety committee, the hourly wage workers may be used in teams responsible for incident investigation or program review. This will improve worker morale, reduce incidents, and create a culture of safety throughout the facility. Finally, the membership in the safety committee, if properly set up, should include management and hourly wage workers. This will support open communication across management and hourly wage worker lines that are not normally open.

Establishing the safety committee

The selection and number of members in the safety committee is vital to having an effective committee. Most safety professionals agree that the number of members should range from ten to fifteen. This allows for enough variety in the committee to accomplish goals without having too many opinions to confuse issues or have members that are unable to express their concerns or ideas. All levels of workers and management at the facility should be represented in the committee. There are no set numbers for the various levels of workers that should be represented in the committee but you may use the ratio of management to hourly wage workers in the facility. The number of hourly wage workers, supervisors, and managers would be reflected in the number of those individuals selected for the safety committee. Having this mixture of members on the safety committee has advantages. First of all, the members are required to cooperate and compromise on safety issues that are presented for consideration. Secondly, the membership would cover a wide range of workers, increasing the level of knowledge that the safety committee would be able to draw from. The group will also benefit from the authority that upper management representatives have to make the necessary changes for correction of safety related issues. The selection of members should be voluntary. If someone is not comfortable being a member of the safety committee they may not represent their area or the committee effectively. The membership should be rotated regularly. This will keep the members interested and provide new points of view on safety issues from the new members selected. The rotation schedule should range from six months to a year. If the members are moved out more often, they may not have time to learn safety committee methods or to cooperate with the other members and this could lead to poor results. If the members are left in place for too long, they could become complacent about safety issues or fail to attend meetings regularly. The terms for membership should overlap. This will allow for a learning curve among new members by having the veteran members there to show correct committee operation. If available, a member of the safety department should attend all meetings to provide an explanation of regulations and maintain the direction of the committee when needed. This direction should be kept to a minimum.

Managing the Committee

Once the committee has been set up, members should elect officers for the different positions necessary for the meeting functions. At a minimum, a Speaker and a Secretary should be selected. A Speaker is needed to lead the meeting and a Secretary is needed to maintain a record of the meeting. Prior to the first meeting, an agenda should be written and posted in a location where all workers will have access to it. An example agenda might be:

- 7:00 Attendance Sign in
- 7:05 Call meeting to order
- 7:10 Discuss old business
- 7:15 Discuss new business
- 7:20 Discuss top priority safety item, i.e., back injuries in warehouse
- 7:25 Evaluate safety program
- 7:30 Adjourn meeting

The agenda is used to let all personnel know what will be discussed at the meeting and to keep the committee on track. After every meeting, notes about what was discussed should be typed, distributed, and posted for all workers to read. This will keep all the workers up to date about what happened at the safety committee meeting. It could also make clear any question that workers may have about the meeting that the safety committee member for their area might not be able to provide.

An appropriate meeting time should be established. The meeting time should be convenient for all members. If the facility works around the clock, allowances might be made by having either irregular meeting times to allow attendance of workers working shifts or by scheduling the meeting when all members can be in attendance. Meetings should last no more than an hour. This is normally the most convenient length of time for both production concerns and personnel time limits.

A time frame should be set for the meeting. This time frame can be bi-weekly, monthly, or quarterly, but really shouldn't be longer than three months. The usefulness of the safety committee will lessen as the time between meetings increases. Follow-up for safety related items might be forgotten, the scope of safety issues may shrink, and a comfortable atmosphere created within the group that is working together may never be achieved. All members should be recognized and have some kind of tag, badge or sticker to identify them as safety committee members to the rest of the workers. This will not only give that member a level of celebrity among their fellow workers but it will also give everyone in their work area a point of contact to voice their opinions and concerns for the safety committee.

Managing the committee should be left to the Speaker unless the meeting falls into a state of total disorder and calm must be re-established. It may be necessary for the manager or the safety representative to step in and restore order in the group. This should be done only in the most extreme circumstances. All members of the safety committee should be allowed to speak on topics and add safety concerns to the committee agenda without fear of unfair criticism. Some members may need guidance on the level of importance of safety hazards or issues presented, but they should not be stopped from adding their concerns to the group's list of points. This might lead to nonparticipation or lack of attendance from those members. Remember that one of the goals of having a safety committee is to empower the workers by involving all members in the decision-making process. If any member is not allowed to express his or her opinions, or their opinions are denigrated, the committee loses the value of that member's input.

Summary

With the creation of a safety committee you can expect an increased level of participation in the safety program from your workers. Advantages of using a safety committee may include:

- Innovative and cost effective solutions for safety problems for the facility.
- Addition of qualified personnel able to review new or existing safety procedures, and any safety programs used at the facility.
- Giving the hourly wage worker a point of contact for safety hazards or other safety issues.
- Having additional staff that are capable of being members of teams responsible for accident investigation or regulatory inspection.

If the committee is properly set up and managed, membership may give workers a sense of ownership of the safety programs and a say in what will ultimately affect their employment with the company. Giving workers a voice in the decision making process of the company can improve morale and also reduce turnover rates. All these things are possible with creative use of the safety committee, but by the same token, if the committee is not properly put into practice, the opposite effects may be seen. A safety committee that is allowed to be idle with membership that doesn't change and issues that go unanswered will have negative effects at the facility. This will further widen any gaps that may exist between the company management and workers by magnifying the feeling of disinterest toward the workers.

Review questions:

1. A safety committee will give the workers a sense of
 - A) Fear about the safety program.
 - B) Empowerment in the safety program.
 - C) Apathy about the safety program.
 - D) Indigestion.
2. The number of members that are selected to the safety committee should range from
 - A) 1 to 5
 - B) 6 to 10
 - C) 10 to 15
 - D) 20 to 30
3. Management representation on the safety committee allows them to
 - A) Take control of the meetings.
 - B) Dictate the production protocols for the plant.
 - C) Force members to keep quiet about unpopular ideas.
 - D) Have authority to make the changes that the group decides are needed.
4. Topics of concern for safety committee consideration
 - A) Should reflect the varying concerns throughout the facility.
 - B) Should be restricted to what upper management would like to have discussed.
 - C) Should be drawn from a hat.
 - D) Should be restricted to what the safety department would like to have discussed.
5. Upper management's quick correction and follow-up on safety issues that are discussed at the safety committee will give the workers a sense of accomplishment.
True False

The Texas Department of Insurance,
Division of Workers' Compensation (TDI/DWC)
E-mail resourcecenter@tdi.state.tx.us
or call 1-800-687-7080 for more information.

Answers

1. B 2. C 3. D 4. A 5. T

Resources

The Texas Department of Insurance, Division of Workers' Compensation (TDI/DWC) Resource Center offers a workers' health and safety video tape library. Call (512) 804-4620 for more information or visit our web site at www.tdi.state.tx.us.

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Disclaimer: Information contained in this training program is considered accurate at time of publication.

Safety Violations Hotline
1-800-452-9595
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