

# Safety Committees

## Meeting Objectives

To highlight the value and function of safety committees in reducing accidents and improving workplace safety. The result should be greater involvement in and support for safety committee efforts.

**(Note:** Some states have laws requiring employers of certain sizes, industries, and/or hazard or accident levels to have safety committees. Be sure to find out your state's regulations, if or how they apply to your operations, and any requirements that should be covered in this meeting.)

## Suggested Materials to Have on Hand

If your organization has functioning safety committees, try to obtain copies of a meeting agenda, audit form, and/or other materials that illustrate their activities.

## Introduction/Overview

Safety committees are a popular and effective way to make workplaces safer. While safety committees have a variety of structures and roles, they have one thing in common—employees and management come together to find ways to prevent accidents, injuries, and illnesses on the job. The benefits for all concerned are obvious: employees have a safe workplace, employers save money on lost work time and workers' comp costs, and everyone can face OSHA inspections with confidence.

A good safety committee has the support and wholehearted participation of management and employees. Some safety committees develop and implement safety programs. Others provide recommendations to management, which has the resources and authority to implement the changes on the job.

Safety committees are effective because they combine the knowledge, enthusiasm, and effort of people with a variety of knowledge, expertise, and perspectives. Those with experience in a job or work area know what the hazards or potential hazards are and often have ideas about how to control them. Those who are less familiar with a job or area play a vital role, too—taking a fresh look at what people on the scene may take for granted.

We're going to look at the structure and operations of safety committees, what they need to be effective, and how you can help—whether you're a committee member or not.

## Regulations

OSHA has no current regulations that require safety committees. The safety agency does believe that it's important to involve employees in creating a safe workplace. Safety

committees, OSHA has noted, offer one way to promote that involvement.

Safety committees are, however, required by law in some states. The state laws vary; some require almost all employers to have safety committees. Some require committees for employers of a certain size, and/or industry, and/or accident experience. In this state, (Note: Explain here whether your state has such a law and, if so, to whom it applies.)

There is another federal law that applies to safety committees. The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) makes it illegal for an employer to try to use the safety committee's structure and activities as a way of trying to get around, or substitute for, the normal collective bargaining process.

That doesn't mean that union shops can't have safety committees. Labor unions are, in fact, often strong supporters of safety committees. Employers have run afoul of the NLRA if they use the safety committee as a mechanism to deal with employees on topics that should be reserved for their union bargaining. Other problems may arise if the employer controls or dominates:

- Formation of the committee
- Operation of the committee
- Outcome of the committee's activities

NLRA problems rarely arise with safety committees, which are generally formed for and stick to their purpose: safety on the job.

## Protection Against Hazards

A safety committee alone cannot keep a workplace safe. It must function as part of a total safety program designed to protect all employees from accidents and work-related injuries and illnesses. Committee members, who represent workers and management, work as a team. Every member must take an active role and show strong support for safety practices and goals.

The number of committee members and how they're selected varies from one company to another. (**Note:** If your organization has a particular number of safety committee members, employee/manager ratio, and/or process for volunteering or being selected for membership, explain it here.)

Safety committees usually have a goal or goals, such as reducing the number of accidents or assuring compliance with OSHA rules. They meet on a regular schedule and follow an agenda. Generally, the committee elects a chair as well as a person to write and distribute minutes of the meetings.

While safety committees may handle a wide variety of functions and projects, some of their more common general roles include:

- Sharing and promoting a commitment to safety
- Exchanging information and expertise

- Helping to set and/or meet safety goals
- Brainstorming on health and safety issues
- Identifying and/or implementing ways to make the workplace safer
- Keeping up-to-date on new hazards, protective measures, safety laws, and safety issues
- Communicating employee safety concerns to management
- Communicating employer safety policies and goals to employees
- Setting a good safety example for others

The committee translates those general roles into more specific functions. The committee may, for example, review accident statistics and try to identify accident trends, causes, and preventive measures. The committee might also examine ways to improve safety training.

Among other tasks often performed by safety committees are:

- Investigating accidents or near-misses
- Inspecting the workplace, or some parts of it, to identify hazards and safety concerns
- Developing recommendations or plans for controlling or eliminating hazards
- Responding to or reviewing employee safety complaints
- Identifying training needs and/or participating in safety training programs
- Creating or updating a safety handbook
- Encouraging all employees to follow safety rules

For example, a committee might be responsible for inspecting the workplace for hazards. In that case, they would develop or obtain an audit checklist and use it for a series of wall-to-wall safety inspections of specific areas of the workplace.

Each inspection would look for every potential hazard in the particular area, from tripping hazards left on the floor, to burned-out lights, broken ladders, or unlabeled chemical containers. The inspection would look at unsafe acts as well as unsafe conditions.

After an inspection, the committee reviews what was discovered, reports on the hazards identified, and suggests ways to reduce or eliminate those hazards. That might mean improving maintenance, rearranging the work area, replacing equipment, providing refresher training, etc. Later, committee members might follow up to see if the area is safer.

These are just examples of a safety committee's possible tasks. But the most

important role for most safety committees is probably to serve as the organization's safety champions. Each committee member should believe safety is important, translate that belief into concrete actions, and act as a safety role model and conscience for others in the organization.

## Safety Procedures

Becoming a safety committee member is both a big responsibility and a way to make a real difference in your workplace and in people's lives.

Safety committee membership takes some effort. If you are considering taking part, you might want to ask yourself some questions:

- Do I have a real interest in safety issues?
- Do I believe that safe work habits are important?
- Do I routinely follow safety procedures and rules?
- Do I have time to attend committee meetings and follow through on assignments?
- Am I willing to report unsafe conditions and speak to other employees about their unsafe acts?
- Am I responsible and dependable enough to complete my committee assignments properly and on time?
- Am I willing to listen to other employees' safety concerns, questions, and ideas?
- Can I work effectively on a team?
- Am I willing to take an active role in safety training?

As these questions demonstrate, joining a safety committee is a serious decision. It's also a worthwhile one. Not only do you help keep the workplace safe, you're likely to build your knowledge and understanding of our business and industry and expand your contacts within the organization.

You don't have to be a member to help contribute to a safety committee's success. In fact, the committee really needs everyone's cooperation and input to do its job thoroughly.

Cooperate with the committee when members are performing their assignments. If, for instance, they're investigating an accident or hazard report, tell them what you know about incidents or concerns. Direct them to other people or information sources that might be helpful.

If the committee is implementing changes designed to control or eliminate hazards they also need your cooperation. Remember, their actions are the result of investigation,

analysis, and broad input. Their purpose is to comply with safety laws and keep us all safe.

You can also help safety committees perform their jobs by:

- Looking out for and reporting potential hazards
- Following safety rules, policies, and procedures
- Recognizing and treating safety as your concern, too—not just the responsibility of committee members

Safety committee assignments take time and effort. On occasion, this may take members away from their regular jobs. If you can, try to pitch in to help them balance their two important responsibilities. Of course, if the committee work regularly puts an excessive burden on the member's co-workers, something will have to give. If you feel this is a problem, talk to the person and/or your supervisor about finding a better balance.

## **Suggested Discussion Questions**

1. Why are safety committees valuable?
2. What kinds of roles could safety committees perform here?
3. What qualities should a safety committee member have?
4. How can safety committees help us improve our safety training efforts?
5. Have you ever served on a safety committee? If so, what were the pros and cons of the experience?
6. What concerns might you report to a safety committee?
7. What benefits have you seen as a result of safety committee efforts?
8. How might safety committees reach out more effectively to all employees?
9. Are you familiar with current safety committee efforts?
10. Are there any other questions?

## **Wrap-up**

Safety committees can have a major impact on the workplace. They provide a format for focusing every segment of the organization on safety. They help us identify and control hazards in the most timely and effective way. In addition, they give us the benefit of a wide range of experiences, knowledge, and perspectives so we can give safety the attention and resources needed to prevent accidents and protect us all from injury and illness on the job.

## Sample Handout

### **An Effective Safety Committee Member**

- Has a genuine interest in safety issues
- Is familiar with safety laws and procedures
- Consistently demonstrates safe work habits
- Has safety-related knowledge and experience that could be helpful to the organization
- Is willing to report unsafe conditions
- Is willing to point out unsafe work habits to co-workers
- Will willingly listen to other employees' safety concerns
- Can devote time to safety committee activities without neglecting job responsibilities
- Is a good team player
- Will complete committee assignments properly and on time
- Is willing to play an active role in safety training