

## Safety Committees – Today's Quality Circles

### Part I: The Organization's Safety Management Plan



by Robert Laford

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Ask any worker if he or she plans on being injured at work today. The answer is no. That answer is also true of emergency responders, be they career employees, on-call employees, or volunteer employees to the response agency. No one expects to get hurt, and each responder should expect that their department or agency is doing everything possible to keep them safe at work and on duty.

Safety Management is a culture. No one expects to get hurt, but many of our people are not proactive in ensuring safety at work. Daily routines become so ingrained in our lives that many of our actions are done through habit – safe and unsafe.

There is a need in the work place in general and especially emergency services that safety, our safety, needs to be in the forefront of each member's thoughts and the basis for his or her actions. An employee who becomes safer through habitual actions that are supported and recommended by management will also bring that safety attitude and that safety culture home to his or her family.

The goal of a positive safety culture in the workforce is to affect all aspects of an employee's life. This culture aimed at promoting a safe and healthy attitude works to make those safe actions habit.

If there is an injury it is a failure of our safety culture. Was it an injury that was contributed to by a worker's inattention or other unsafe act? Was it an injury that was contributed to by the employee's lack of training? Was it an injury that was contributed to by faulty machinery, or another unsafe condition?

Many times we can trace the root cause of the injury to attitude and training. Did the employee's attitude or apathy towards the

task and proper safety practices cause the injury? Or was the injury's root cause because that employee was not prepared, not properly trained or informed to do the job safely and correctly?

A positive safety culture has to be developed where every responder, every employee, takes a personal stake in the agency's safety management plan. In his book, *Theory Z*, William Ouchi discusses how the Japanese form of management draws employees into a partnership through participation. The workers, the people who do the jobs, become part of the decision making process.

This form of management became popular in the 1980's in the auto industry through Quality Circles. Employees become participants in problem solving. By allowing this ownership the workers feel that management is listening to their ideas and they are more than just paid laborers. Ouchi says that Japanese workers develop a "strong orientation to collective values, particularly a collective sense of responsibility."

This type of employee empowerment, participation and collective sense of responsibility is what is needed to continue the change in the safety culture to one of positive action towards responder safety.

NFPA 1500 says that the Fire Department shall maintain a written policy statement that spells out the services that the department provides. This document lists availability of manpower, apparatus, staffing requirements for certain responses, etc. This document also points to the department's safety or risk management plan. That plan addresses the department's risk identification procedures, risk evaluation, and risk mitigation.

The occupational health and safety

standard also requires the development of a department policy that identifies specific goals and objectives for the prevention and elimination of incidents and injuries through a managed plan. This plan and the department's safety policies, procedures, rules and regulation are all in place to work towards the goals of the department to reduce injury exposure to its members.

Included in this management plan is the need for a safety officer and an occupational safety and health committee.

NFPA 1500 goes on in detail over such subjects as Training and Education, Vehicles and Equipment, Protective Clothing and Equipment, Emergency Operations, Facility Safety, Medical and

Physical Requirements, and Member Assistance Programs. This comprehensive document offers very specific guidance in developing a service plan that will work to improve responder safety on and off the emergency scene.

All these specific ways to improve firefighter and emergency personnel safety, both at the emergency scene and away from the emergency scene, needs to become part of the department's overall safety management plan and its daily, habitual operations for every member. This safety management plan should cover every facet of the job that needs to be done from clerical jobs and general housekeeping to emergency operations.

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## *Everything should lead to and from your safety program*



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Some things that should be included in an overall safety management plan are the same as the specific issues covered by the NFPA standard:

- Emergency Scene Procedures
- Proper Protective Clothing
- Personnel Accountability
- Facilities Maintenance
- Training
- Equipment and Apparatus
- Physical and Emotional Maintenance of Personnel

**The Safety Officer.** Emergency services now realize that there is a viable need for a scene safety officer at emergency scenes. There are a number of standards that either require or recommend that a scene safety officer be part of the overall scene management of the fire department's emergency operations. The accepted practice is to appoint a staff position at an emergency to look after the health and welfare of the responding team members during the incident.

The fire department safety officer has an important job during an emergency. His background in fire behavior, building construction, and department standard operating guidelines all help him or her to evaluate on scene risks and to help the department work towards the safest possible emergency scene. This proactive approach on the emergency scene is an attempt to reduce or eliminate the needless injuries and deaths of our firefighters.

This type of proactive safety management should not stop when the emergency scene is concluded. The safety officer has an important role outside emergency functions also. The safety officer should have a role in department strategic planning, facilities and equipment maintenance and purchasing, as well as an active role in personnel training and development.

Each of these issues and the department's entire safety management plan is not only the responsibility of the appointed safety officer. Each member of the department has a responsibility to provide the safest workplace possible. This responsibility belongs to the management

and the employees. Everything that is done at an emergency scene and during daily routines should always revolve around safety.

One way to get the membership involved in the department's safety management or risk management program is through an occupational safety committee. Risks posed to firefighters during down time are not only present for career forces that have firefighters who spend days and nights at the station. That risk is also present for call and volunteer people who only work at the station during specific times. Statistics have consistently shown that more call and volunteer firefighters die each year in fire service related accidents than career firefighters. A safety program and an active safety committee is as important to call and combination departments as it is to fully career departments and services.

**Safety Committees.** A safety committee opens the door for active participation from all levels of the organization. It provides a forum that gives the management's safety policy some validity. The work of the committee should be shared with those that it effects from the top of the organizational structure to the bottom.

Each member of the department should know the members of the occupational health and safety committee. Member should understand that their opinions and their input to the committee are an important part of the department's safety management plan. Members should also have an understanding how the participants of the safety committee are chosen. Are they elected, are they appointed, or is the committee made up of volunteers? This open and active participation is an important facet of getting each employee to buy into the goals and objectives of the safety management plan. As with all the parts of the safety management plan, the safety committee needs the commitment and the participation of the top management. If the workforce sees that the safety committee and the safety program only receives vague lip service from the top management, they are not

going to buy into the program either.

A safety management program is in place to promote safety and reduce injuries and incidents of your organization's workforce. Past statistics have shown that year after year responders are needlessly injured and killed. Sometimes these injuries and deaths occur on an emergency scene, but other times it is during general station business, training and non-emergency operations. Both labor and management need to commit to supporting an overall program that evaluates risks and the means by which those risks and hazards can be reduced.

A proactive safety officer involved in both emergency and non-emergency operations is one part of that safety management program. An occupational health and safety committee is another are of that plan.

In next month's issue of Responder, Part 2 will address: The Safety Committee Roles and Responsibilities.

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