

Safety Committees – Today's Quality Circles

Part II: Roles And Responsibilities



by Robert Laford

What kind of a safety committee should your organization have? There are several avenues in forming how the committee should function and what kind of action it can take. The three basic make-ups are (1) Advisory, (2) Policy Making, and (3) Combination.

An advisory safety committee investigates safety issues within the department and offers guidelines to the department management. This type of committee does not make policy, but rather offers opinion to those that do make the rules.

A policy—based committee is entrusted with the power to make or change policies and priorities based on their safety findings. As with the advisory committee, the policy committee may still have to investigate or research topics, issues, job analysis, etc., but this committee is also granted the further discretion to formulate policy and rules.

The third type, combination, takes into account thoughts from both the advisory and the policy based committees. When the committee was originally empowered they would have been given specific guidelines on their authority. In some instances their authority may only be advisory while other issues may allow them latitude to develop and implement policy.

One thought when forming a safety committee is deciding what should the committee have for guidance. An occupational health and safety committee is not a labor-management bargaining committee. If a committee is dominated by the management, in that it is the management's issues that are predominately dealt with in committee business, the National Labor Relations Board has found in several cases that this constitutes a labor organization and is grounds for an unfair

labor practice.

In their article *Worker Safety Committees and the Law*, Henry Zaccardi and Scott MacDonald discuss what they consider a milestone ruling for the NLRB in this matter. Several private companies were ordered to disband their safety committees and eliminate the decisions the committee had implemented because the NLRB had interpreted the committee as a labor committee.

Zaccardi and MacDonald said, "Unfortunately, these NLRB decisions eliminated safety committees that had accomplished some admirable goals. The committees had improved safety conditions and increased employee involvement in safety incentive awards."

The Labor Relations Board did establish some guidelines that will help safety committees steer clear of violating labor law. These included Brainstorming, Information gathering, Education and training, and Management participation (instead of management rule).

Brainstorming offers participants an opportunity to throw out different ideas that may or may not lead to solutions for the issue at hand. For brainstorming to be effective, the members of the committee have to feel comfortable that their ideas are equally important and that no one or the brainstorming process itself will be ridiculed. With brainstorming a true solution for a challenge may come out of an idea that seemed miles away from the problem.

With any situation that is brought to the safety committee, it is imperative that pertinent information is gathered. Enough information to either make an informed decision or an informed recommendation.

Continued on Page 14

Robert Laford is Campus Safety Officer with Environmental Health and Safety at the University of Massachusetts. He is also a sixteen-year fire service veteran serving with the Petersham (MA) Fire Department.

Continued from Page 13

As information is gathered it may shed a different light on the data than if a decision was made off the original incident.

As issues and incidents make their way to the safety committee, this information and data may begin to show a need for employee training and education. The safety committee forum normally has a large amount of information surrounding hazards, injuries, near misses, and the like.

This type of information can show trends in injuries, target specific hazards, and also offer solutions to improving the problems. Any safety committee, policy driven or advisory driven can make a difference by using the information they gather to improve employee safety through focused training.

As mentioned earlier, the safety committee and the safety management program need the participation and the

support of all levels of management to be successful. The NLRB's rulings have also shown that the pendulum can swing too far the other way also.

This would be when the committee is driven by management and accomplishes only the management's goals and objectives – technically becoming a labor organization to “*deal with*” the employees. The committee members, labor side and management side need to develop goals, objectives, and an action plan for these on the basis of safety and not an agenda driven by either management or the workforce.

What should the function of the safety committee be – it's roles and responsibilities? As with any organization the safety committee needs direction and leadership. What is the mission of the group? If there has been no forethought of what should come out of the committee, the group may slide into the common pitfall of being an organization that listens to griping all the time.

Although there is some merit to fielding complaints form around the larger organization, if the safety committee only acts, or rather reacts, to complaints it is not functioning proactively for the betterment for the workforce.

The mission statement should show where the support for the committee comes from in the overall organization. The support should come from management and the workforce. As mentioned earlier, the committee shouldn't strictly be a management or strictly a labor organization. For it to move forward it needs support, commitment, and participation from all levels.

Other staples in the safety committee mission statement may include:

- To promote continued safety training, education and communication
- To provide a safe and healthy work environment
- To create and enforce company policies relating to all safety issues

- To strive for the elimination of all accidents in the workplace
- To gain and keep 100% support from top management for all committee activities

Looking over this brief list shows that an effective safety committee must be proactive. They must be working to prevent injuries and incidents by developing and promoting ideas and ideals that lead to a safer working environment.

Answering complaints and involvement in injury and incident investigation is an important part of the overall safety management plan; but if that is all that is done, the committee and the safety management program is only reacting to crisis not working to prevent it.

The members of the committee may be on the committee for different reasons. They may have an interest in safety, they may have been chosen by their co-workers or supervisors, or their

position may automatically give them a seat on the committee. No matter the reason, each member of the committee has some basic responsibilities to the committee.

Participation is the most important responsibility of safety committee members. The committee can only function effectively with the input and involvement of its members from around the department.

Another primary responsibility is to set an example. The other members of the organization should know who is on the safety committee. If they know who the members are they are also going to be watching those members to see if *they* are taking safety seriously.

The safety committee members should become active participants in training. Training for themselves in how to better represent the concerns of the membership; but also in developing training for the organization in general as it relates to safety issues. This type of training would be to support the

overall safety management plan. Such issues as employee training on workplace inspection, identifying target hazards in the workplace, risk analysis, etc.

Another general responsibility of the committee should be involvement in incident reporting and follow-up. For every injury in the workforce there has been many "near misses." If a system is developed to report the injuries, actual incidents that occur, and the near misses, then future injuries may be avoided. Members of the committee should be actively involved in the follow-up of near misses. This process helps identify possible hazard areas within the work area. Once these areas are identified – programs and policies can be developed to remedy the hazards.

Some specific safety committee responsibilities are:

Continued on Page 25

SAFETY COMMITTEES

Continued from Page 15

Employer responsibilities

- Help identify safety and health hazards.
- Listen to safety committee members. It's important!
- Report all unsafe conditions and practices in accordance with the safety committee procedures.
- Contribute to or make suggestions for improving workplace safety and health.
- Participate in committee activities when requested – be positive.
- Keep an open mind and a positive attitude.
- Make an effort to communicate with the safety committee members – active communication goes two ways.
- Follow procedures and practices adopted by the safety committee.
- Cooperate with the safety committee members in the performance of their duties.
- Consider being a member in support of the committee and to promote a safer working environment.

What should be the membership make-up of the safety committee? The make-up of an occupational health and safety committee should be a cross section of the membership of your organization. Everyone who is a member of your organization should feel that their needs are being adequately and fairly represented through the safety committee. You should look for participants from:

- Different shifts
- Different locations, buildings, or areas
- Different job classifications and ranks
- Maintenance employees
- Management and Administrative representatives
- Clerical staff

As with the need for each employee to believe they are being represented on the committee, make sure that they all

know how to become a member of the committee. Is it through volunteers, elections from fellow employees, or are they appointed?

Consider using incentives, like trinkets, t-shirts, jackets, etc. to allow for the membership to stand out. The active membership of a safety committee deserves some recognition for their extra work.

Let the workforce know who the employees are on the committee, how to get information and issues to them, and what goes on at the meetings. The issues discussed and resolved through a safety committee are issues that are from and for the general workforce. The committee and its purpose are there to improve the employee safety. Those employees outside the committee need to understand that their opinions and ideas are a welcome part of the committee's work.

§

Responder
Management Leadership Source