

## Safety Committees – Today's Quality Circles

### Part III: The Effectiveness Of The Safety Committee



How should the business of the safety committee be handle? The most important word for any safety committee to take seriously is *credibility*. What the committee does has to appear credible. The committee must appear credible to management and to the workforce.

The accountability to both the top and bottom of the organization is essential, the goals of the safety committee cannot be accomplished without support and buy-in from both the management and labor sides of the organization.

Management wants an effective committee where there are accomplishments to balance the cost of the program. Even if the committee spends no money from the organization's budget, there is a cost in time.

Each time the committee meets those members are not at their respective jobs, and in the larger circle of fiscal management there has to be some justification of those dollars spent. The labor side of the coin is also looking for accomplishments. What has the committee done to improve safety for their membership?

All the issues discussed when organizing a safety committee are equally important to the informed members of the departments.

- Who are the members?
- How do you become a member?
- When does the committee meet?
- What is the purpose of the committee?
- Is it an advisory committee or a policy-making committee?
- What kinds of issues are brought to the committee?
- How are issues brought to the committee?
- What type of action has the committee taken on these issues?

One way to provide department members with information is to post the agenda of up coming meetings and the minutes of the past meetings. A "community" bulletin board used by the employees may be one avenue to pursue the dissemination of this information.

Effective and proactive safety committees have dedicated members and competent leaders. A well-planned agenda will help the committee work on the safety business at hand in a more organized manner. A publicly posted agenda will also afford department members from outside the committee the opportunity to see what issues are being discussed. Input to committee members from employees throughout the organization is important for all issues that come before the committee.

Just as employee membership is important on the committee so the workforce has ownership in the safety management program, employee input to the members of the committee is also very important. The decisions, actions, and programs that come out of the safety committee will effect employees. Employee participation in the process as it develops will help with the acceptance of any change better than if the changes are made unilaterally without greater employee input.

The agenda should be limited to one page in length and include such pieces of information as:

- Date of meeting
- Location and time of meeting
- Topic(s) or subject matter
- Attendees such as a special guest, speaker or group

*Continued on Page 14*

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*Continued from Page 13*

The agenda should be distributed to members of the committee and posted for all employees to review several days before the meeting. Different styles, art work, and specialized poster paper are all ways of making the safety committee's events and notices stand out among the other notices on the bulletin board and on people's desks. If the agenda and the meeting content catch people's attention it will increase the chance of attendance and participation.

Minutes of the committee meetings explain to the reader what issues the committee is working on, and what actions are being followed through the committee. Minutes should be brief, concise, and well organized, so that they'll be easy to read and understand. There is no magic number in terms of pages. In general, the shorter the better, as long as important information is not sacrificed.

Minutes should include such information as:

- Date and time meeting was held
- Names of members present
- Names of members absent
- Name, title, and organization of guests
- Unfinished business including past minutes, reports and/or recommendations.

Minutes should be distributed to members of the committee, certain levels of the organization's management, and posted for the entire organizational membership to review.

Copies should also go to managers and supervisors affected by decisions and recommendations made by the committee. There are different styles used to make the minutes easy and informative to read. One such example would be a newsletter format where minutes are also integrated with other

timely safety information and current related news from inside and outside the organization.

This positive slant on safety in the workforce may get more people involved in reading the minutes as well as participating in the concerns, recommendations, and actions of the committee. The information made available through this type of format may provide insight into safety issues that affect the membership outside of work as well as inside the job.

One such example may be a recent recall of equipment that may be used inside the organization as well as at home. If employees see that this type of information is valuable to not only themselves, but also their families, then they may be more apt to pay attention when the information and the minutes are released.

The credibility of the safety committee and the safety management pro-

gram comes to light again when the committee's history of actions and follow-up are reviewed. What performance has the committee shown to the members and management of the department? Is the committee all talk or is the committee a proactive group with management support and labor buy-in of the program, recommendations, and policies that come out of the meetings?

The success of the safety committee and the effectiveness of its meeting management and accomplishments include:

- Did all representatives come to the meeting prepared?
- Was the agenda followed?
- Does everyone contribute in a civil manner?
- Were issues openly discussed and resolved?
- Were recommendations made and put in writing?
- Was training/orientation given and was it successful?

- Does everyone know what is expected of him or her?
- Was the next meeting scheduled, with topics to be discussed?
- Is the support system in place to help committee members fulfill duties and responsibilities?
- Did management respond in writing to committee recommendations in a timely manner?
- Were corrective actions taken in a timely manner?

The work of the committee should be summarized at conclusion of business. There is a need to establish action items and responsibilities: who, what, when? What policies and procedures were done? Are there recommendations in regards to these issues?

Is there a need for research on any specific issues before the committee, training needs, resolution to employee complaints, or the need for further investigative follow-up? Is there a need to bring in any specialist or guests to

give the committee and the organization a better understanding or different view of a specific situation?

All the issues that arise on the committee's agenda need to have actions in some form. The issues and actions taken are important pieces of the information that needs to be shared with the organization's entire membership from the top management to the newest front-line member. Again, this helps establish credibility between the general membership and the safety committee. That credibility is a necessary component of the overall employee buy-in of the committee's work and the safety management program.

What should be done about personnel problems within the safety committees? As with any other labor-management initiative there is bound to be some concern and challenges that arise form a safety committee.

*Continued on Page 22*

## **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SAFETY COMMITTEE**

*Continued from Page 22*

Administration has an extensive web page on the Internet that has a vast collection of information and data. They can be found at <http://www.osha.gov>.

The National Safety Council, your local chapter of the Safety Council, your community's insurance carrier or worker's compensation carrier are all agencies that can help to begin a health and safety committee. The Department of Labor (DOL), National Fire Academy (NFA), and National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) are also resources for gathering information on initiating or improving your department's safety management plan.

### **CONCLUSION**

For a safety committee to be a successful and effective part of a department's safety management plan it needs several components.

- Commitment from Management to support the Committee and the Safety Program in general.
- Labor and Management accountability to safety policies and ownership of the Safety Management Program.
- Employee involvement in the Committee and in the problem solving process of safety challenges.

The safety committee is only one part of the safety management plan. It is a very important piece because it shows the organization as a whole that the top managers feel safety is important. A Health and Safety Committee shows employee ownership of the program is equally important.

Other facets of the safety program need to be woven into every day life to make the safety culture one that lasts. Hazard identification and control, incident and injury reporting and investigation, employee training, and evaluation of the program are all pieces of the safety puzzle that need to be implemented, honed and fine tuned to make the best possible use of the safety man-

agement program and our personnel.

The emergency services, be it fire, police, EMS, or other providers, must continually work to improve responder safety – during both emergency operations and non-emergency times. The department safety officer is the facilitator of the overall safety management plan. An occupational safety committee is the membership's access to improving the safety management plan and their own personal safety on the job. This plan is the blueprint to provide a safe work environment both on and off the emergency scene. For the improved safety of emergency responders and the success of a safety program the safety officer, the safety committee, the department's management, and the department members must work in a cooperative effort for a safer work environment.

The ultimate goal for each of us; Chief Officers and administrators, line officers, safety officers, and first-line responders, should be that no line of duty injuries or deaths occur again. Every emergency service must focus on the necessary fact that what we do and how we do, must be done in the safest and most efficient manner.

Input on the best way to accomplish this goal should include the people that carry out the plan. An occupational safety committee can give the first-line responders the access to help improve their own safety and provide a better level of care to the community they serve.

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