



10 Success Factors for Effective Safety Committees

Safety committees are a common way to get employees involved in the safety process. Often, safety committees are put together to assist with inspections and audits, review incidents and injuries, solicit suggestions to reduce injuries and illnesses, and/or to conduct behavior observations. But, is the committee achieving its fullest potential? Although this question is difficult to answer, I suspect that the answer is no in many cases or there are at least some ways in which the safety committee can improve.

Safety committees that are haphazardly formed ultimately have sustainability problems. There are both assets and liabilities associated with forming committees, groups, or other work teams. The assets include greater knowledge and experience, more approaches to problem-solving, and better implementation of the safety program. Potential liabilities with forming safety committees include individual domination, conflicting alternative solutions, premature decisions, and prior commitments of members. In many cases, little consideration is given to group and team dynamics when forming and implementing a safety committee. If you are designing a safety committee and/or needing to revive the safety committee at your work site, consider the following 10 success factors for effective safety committees.

1 Clear Direction

Successful safety committees have a clear understanding of their purpose, why the group exists, and what they are trying to accomplish. For example, one safety committee stated its mission as follows: "This safety committee exists to continuously reduce the risk of injury and illness to employees and visitors at this facility. The committee will do so in a way that uses the organization's resources efficiently and will strive to achieve an optimal level of safety and health for the organization."

This statement of direction is clear and simple as it contains only a few objectives. But those objectives can allow the committee to make intelligent tradeoffs. When faced with a decision regarding whether an engineering control should be implemented and/or a safety procedure written, the statement invites the group to ask, "Does this action reduce the risk of injury or illnesses? Does it help us achieve an optimal level of safety? Is it feasible?"

The statement is also clear about the group's purpose but does not say how the committee should get there. Two common errors in setting direction is (1) failing to set any direction at all and (2) setting a direction that is all about means (i.e., the how) but does not specify the ends (i.e., the why) (Wageman, 1997).

2 Common Performance Goals

Common goals are critical to the committee's success. In other words, there should be no hidden agendas. For a goal to enhance performance, it has to be congruent with the committee's overall direction, challenging, and completed by a specified deadline. Unlike the committee's statement of its overall purpose, goals should be specific descriptions of work the committee is to accomplish within a specific timeframe. Examples of some goals for a safety committee might include the following:

- Provide accident investigation training to all front-line supervisors by the end of the year.
- Conduct a risk assessment of all work tasks by the 1st quarter of the year.
- Prepare a job safety analysis for all "high-risk" activities performed at this location by the 3rd quarter of the year.
- Complete a feasibility study of installing a local exhaust ventilation system in the welding shop by the 2nd quarter of the year.

Management may provide the expected outcome of the group's effort; however, the group should determine how they will achieve these targets. Such goals and objectives should be frequently reviewed and updated, as necessary, during committee meetings to periodically measure the team's performance and reinforce the committee's direction.



3 Definition of Roles

Basic roles of the group include a leader, facilitator, and team members. In-house facilitators must be chosen with care, as replacing them can be debilitating to group dynamics. Outside facilitators are good if they are already known and earned the respect of committee members on other projects. The advantage of outside facilitators is that it is easier and less traumatic to remove them if they prove to be unsuited for the committee (Ousnamer, 1997).

The role of the leader is most critical as the committee develops (Wageman, 1997). Initially, the leader assists with the design of the committee, provides clear direction as described above, and helps the committee progress. Later, the leader acts as a coach and monitors the progress of the committee.

The roles of each committee member must be clearly understood. Each member has unique attributes to the team and should recognize why they were selected for the team. These roles may or may not be formally defined, but they should, at least, be communicated to avoid duplication of efforts and conflict. The leader may choose to discuss these roles individually with each member or lead a discussion with the group to ensure the roles of each member are understood.

4 Real Committee Function

The basic elements of the work should require members to work together to complete significant tasks (Wageman, 1997). Spending time together as a whole group is critical. Often, I find a committee's primary function is to split up and conduct routine safety inspections (by department or area). One problem with this approach is that the task of simply performing a safety inspection can usually be done by one or two people and does not require the work of the entire committee. Such tasks can actually be assigned to other employees to get more employees involved

in the safety program. However, a better utilization of the safety committee is for the committee to train employees on how to conduct the safety inspections. As trained employees conduct safety inspections, the committee can then review the inspection/audit findings, prioritize these findings by the risk of injury, determine root causes, and evaluate possible corrective actions.

5 Visible Management Support and Commitment

Members must perceive that management fully supports and is committed to the committee's efforts; otherwise, committee members will lose dedication to their mission. Management should visibly show interest in the safety committee's activities and communicate a sense of urgency for the group's purpose. By doing so, members will be ensured that their purpose is aligned to the company's overall business strategy. As a result, a tone of aspiration will be set. Management should not wait until problems within the committee develop, but instead, show a proactive interest in the group.

6 Mutual Responsibility and Group Accountability

One problem when safety committees are carelessly formed is that accountability may be lost. Therefore, the leader must determine prior to the formation of the committee how they will be held accountable as a group if substandard effort is produced. Will the entire committee be replaced? On the other hand, how will the group be recognized for performing outstanding work? The important point is that the whole group must be held accountable for poor work. Likewise, the whole group should be recognized for solving problems. The leader must clearly express to the committee members this mutual responsibility along with the potential consequences of poor performance.





7 Authority to Manage the Work

Having the authority to manage the committee's tasks will most-likely lead to a self-managing safety committee. Such authority means that the committee, not the leader, has the authority to make decisions over basic committee functions (Wageman, 1997). If management and/or the leader intervene with this authority, the committee's sense of ownership for the work will be compromised. Instead, the leader should explicitly address the committee's authority and the boundaries around it. The committee should understand that the leader is available for consultation but the ultimate decision-making authority for solving safety-related problems belongs to the safety committee.

8 Committee Size and Skill Set

The primary factor in determining the size of any problem solving team is the number of tasks, skills needed, and complexity of the functions required. The key for committees to be successful is for the first

person in the workflow to be interdependent with the last person and all must be mutually accountable to each other for results. Although there have been successful teams comprised of 40 or more people, teams with a large number of members tends to lose its mutual accountability. Ideally, committees should consist of members between five and 15 members (Barnard, 1999). Where there are many complex tasks requiring a larger number of people, smaller subcommittees should be formed to enhance team interdependence and mutual accountability.

9 Basic Material Resources

A safety committee needs the necessary tools to perform their work. Safety committees should not be formed from the bottom-up and have to beg or search for the appropriate resources. This should be considered in the initial committee formation, and the team leader should negotiate with management what resources are needed. Such resources include appropriate meeting space, access to relevant data and reports, time to perform committee tasks, and additional training. Some upfront team-building training and/or workshops may be needed depending on the expected duration of the project and dynamics of the group.

10 Interdependence and Trust

Trust and interdependence go hand-in-hand. There's no magic recipe to instantly creating a high level of trust among a group. Instead, it often takes a long time to develop as a result of previous experiences. Conversely, trust can be lost in minutes when there is dishonesty among team members and/or members do not get along. In essence, trust and interdependence is a relationship issue that depends on daily interactions.

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