

THE ULTIMATE SAFETY COMMITTEE HANDBOOK

**A Comprehensive
Guide to help you
start and run an
effective safety
committee or team.**



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Table of Contents

COURSE INTRODUCTION	1
Safety committees mean involvement!	1
What's the key? Communications	1
Why is it so important to know who we are?.....	2
Just who do you think you are?	2
What is the role of the safety committee?	3
What is the purpose of the safety committee.....	3
Major purposes of the safety committee	3
How does the safety committee go about fulfilling its purpose?	4
The safety committee must communicate effectively	4
What is the "function" of the safety committee?.....	5
Chapter Exercises.....	6
Chapter TWO: GETTING STARTED	7
Don't pass this Chapter up just because you already have a safety committee!	7
First things first...sell the idea to the boss.....	7
You've got to the "\$\$ talk bottom line \$\$" to get management's attention	7
What are the bottom-line benefits of a safety committee?	7
The safety committee protects the employer as well as the employee	8
Now that you've got support, get it down on paper	8
Duties of the Chairperson	9
Duties of the safety committee recorder	9
Safety committee member duties	9
Safety committee membership	10
Chapter Exercises.....	10
CHAPTER THREE: MOTIVATING INVOLVEMENT.....	11
Introduction	11
How does the safety committee gain credibility with management?	12
Expert Power	12
Position Power	12
How does the safety committee gain credibility with employees?.....	13
Look in the mirror	13
How does management demonstrate its commitment to the safety committee?...13	
Motivated safety committee members	14
How does management encourage volunteers?.....	14
Chapter Exercises:	15
CHAPTER FOUR: SAFETY COMMITTEE TRAINING	17
Introduction	17
The benefits of training the safety committee	17
Safety committee operations	18
Hazard identification and control	18
The Hierarchy of Controls	19
Accident investigation procedures.....	19
The six-step accident investigation procedure.....	20
The Accident Report	20
Ineffective accident reports.....	21
Why accident reports fail	21
Other important subjects.....	21
Training safety committee members	22
Chapter Exercises.....	23

CHAPTER FIVE: HAZARD IDENTIFICATION TOOLS	25
Introduction	25
What causes most workplace accidents?	25
Hazardous conditions	26
Unsafe behaviors.....	26
Unsafe behaviors may occur at any level in the organization.....	26
Unsafe employee behaviors	26
Inappropriate manager behaviors	27
System Design and Implementation.....	27
Two important tools to identify hazards	28
The Safety Inspection...an effective tool	28
Advantages and disadvantages of using the safety inspection checklist	29
Job Hazard Analysis (JHA)	29
A better way of doing things	29
The OSHA 300 Log	30
Chapter Exercises:	30
CHAPTER SIX: PROBLEM SOLVING TECHNIQUES	31
Introduction	31
Solving safety problems	31
The basic steps in the problem solving process	31
Step 1: Understand the problem.....	31
Step 2: Discover the cause(s)	32
Step 3: Target Solutions.....	32
Step 4: Sell the solution	32
Step Five: Implement the solution	33
The techniques	33
Understanding the problems	34
Getting to the facts.....	34
Mind Mapping - Another tool to identify problems.....	36
Brainstorming.....	37
Perception is reality	37
Chapter Exercises:	38
CHAPTER SEVEN: DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE RECOMMENDATIONS	39
What is a good recommendation?	39
Why don't decision-makers respond quickly?.....	39
To develop great recommendations, ask six key questions	39
Estimating direct and indirect costs.....	42
What is the ratio between insured and uninsured costs in your scenario?.....	42
What is the ratio between total accident costs to insured costs?.....	42
What is XYZ Manufacturing's return on their investment going to be?	43
CHAPTER EIGHT: MANAGING MEETINGS	45
Introduction	45
Characteristics of an Effective Safety Committee Meeting.....	46
How often should safety committees meet?.....	47
Safety committees should meet after a safety inspection	47
The difference between a "safety meeting" and a "safety committee meeting"	47
Preparing for the Meeting	48
Preparing the Chairperson	48
Preparing the Agenda	48
Preparing the Meeting Room	50
Preparing the Recorder	51
Conducting the Meeting.....	51
Before the Meeting Starts.....	51

Plan the Work: Work the Plan	52
If it isn't in writing, it didn't get done!	54
How to take minutes.....	54
Safety Committee Meeting Communication Basics	54
It's not what you say: It's how you say it!	55
Eggs on the Wing	55
Effective One-On-One Communication Techniques	56
Discussion Methods	56
Steps in Making Decisions.....	58
Handling Problem Situations	58
Words Have Effect	58
Conflicts in Meetings.....	59
Rules for Disagreeing Diplomatically.....	59
Too Little and Too Much Participation	60
After the Meeting	61
Evaluate Meeting Process and Outcomes.....	62
Improve the Meeting Process	62
Chapter Exercise:	63
Handbook Study Questions	63
APPENDIX A. XYZ Safety Committee Policy Statement.....	71
APPENDIX 2. Who, What, Where, When, and How.....	73
APPENDIX 3. Accident Prevention Program	75
Suggested Additional Reading.....	89

COURSE INTRODUCTION

Safety committees mean involvement!

If you want to have the maximum positive impact from the investment in safety and health, involve employees whenever possible. It's the right thing to do, and smart business to. Here's why:

Your workers are the persons most exposed to potential safety and health hazards. They have a vested interest in effective safety programs. Line workers can be highly valuable problem-solvers. Safety program decisions involving employees takes advantage of their wider field of experience. Employees are far more likely to support and use programs in which they have had input. They value what they own! Employees are much more satisfied when they are encouraged to contribute and their contributions are taken seriously. Line workers usually have a more detailed knowledge of operations. Knowledgeable and aware employees tend to be safe workers and also good sources of ideas for better hazard prevention and control.

What's the key? Communications

The key to a successful safety and health program is effective communications. To help make sure communications is efficient and effective, it's important that an employer create a knowledgeable internal team that fosters communication. What's that team called? The safety committee, of course. Consequently, in this handbook we are going to explore concepts and tools to help you:

- Start and grow an effective labor-management safety committee,
- Assess and evaluate your current safety committee; and
- Recommend changes to improve the effectiveness of your safety committee.

CHAPTER ONE: ROLE, PURPOSE, FUNCTION

Introduction



You don't have to climb a mountain and sit on a big rock for six days to get some kind of idea about what the safety committee is all about and your place in it. However, it's important that you do get a good picture (clear vision) about how you and the safety committee can compliment the mission of your company. To get a clear picture, you must first understand the **role** and **purpose(s)** of the safety committee so that it may **function** to help, not hurt the organization's ability to keep the workplace safe and healthful.

Why is it so important to know who we are?

The performance of the safety committee is a direct result of the role the safety committee plays. Simply put, what we do depends on who we think we are. So, naturally, the safety committee needs to first understand it's role within the organization. Once the safety committee's role is understood, an effectively safety committee plan may be developed that describes its role, purpose, objectives, and strategies to meet them. So let's take a look at the safety committee's role and purpose a little more closely.

Just who do you think you are?

Find the term "role" in the dictionary and you'll read something like:

- The characteristic and expected social behavior of an individual.
- A position or title.

The "role we play" helps define who we are, how we should behave, and what we should be doing as an individual or as a member of a group.

The position title you hold in the organization carries with it certain expectations of performance associated with the position. You play the role you're expected to play depending on the position you have. In reality, we play many roles both at work and at home. You probably play the role of one or more of the following positions: mother, father, coach, scout leader, music teacher, electrician, pastor, police officer, nurse, or a mayor. If you pay attention, you'll notice how our behaviors change depending on the role we happen to be playing at the moment.

What is the role of the safety committee?

One way of looking at the role of the safety committee that is probably most effective is to think of it as an internal consultant group with expectations and responsibilities similar to that of an external consultant hired by the company.

What is the purpose of the safety committee?

Armed with insight into the role of the safety committee, let's take a look at what its purpose or mission might be. A quick review of our friendly dictionary once again defines purpose as:

- A desired or intended result or effect.

As you learned above, the safety committee performs the role of an internal consultant group with primary responsibilities to provide expert advice and assistance. Some companies create a "vision statement" that reflects **who they are**. This is a statement about their role in the community and society in general.

A company might also write a mission statement that explains **what they do** to support their vision. The purpose of the safety committee might also be viewed as its "mission." Purpose reflects what the safety committee intentionally does to support its assigned role.

Major purposes of the safety committee

What are some of primary reasons for the safety committee? Let's summarize:

- Help protect the employer by providing useful information;
- Help protect the employee by responding to safety concerns;
- Bring labor and management together in a cooperative way to solve problems; and
- Help the employer educate and motivate all employees about the importance of safety.
- Help the employer educate and motivate all supervisors and managers to identify hazards and take corrective action.

All of these purpose statements emphasize the safety committee's responsibility to **assist** the employer, not to **do** the safety job for the employer. Management may be able to delegate authority for managing safety programs to the safety committee on paper, but that won't hold if the workplace is determined to be unsafe as a result of an OSHA inspection. The responsibility for safety and health lies squarely on the shoulders of line managers from top to bottom because they, not the safety committee, control workplaces.

How does the safety committee go about fulfilling its purpose?

OK, so now we have a good idea what our role is, and that understanding shapes the purpose the safety committee.

- Gather information by conducting inspections, audits, surveys and interviews
- Identify problems: workplace hazardous conditions and unsafe behaviors (surface symptoms)
- Determine the causes: the underlying safety management system weaknesses (root causes) contributing to hazardous conditions and unsafe behaviors
- Develop solutions and submit recommendations
- Monitor progress when changes are implemented
- Recommend further revisions and improvements

It's important to note that none of these responsibilities requires the safety committee to actually control a budget, safety programs or people. When the safety committee assumes the role of a consultant group within a company, it is not expected to control a budget, conduct safety training, purchase equipment or correct hazards. These responsibilities are more properly that of line managers, from the CEO down through first line supervisor.

The safety committee must communicate effectively

One of the most important responsibilities of the individual safety committee representative is to receive safety concerns from employees, report those concerns to the safety committee, and provide timely feedback to employees on the status or response to those concerns. Failure to effectively fulfill this important responsibility has the potential to render the safety committee unsuccessful in its ability to help the employer solve safety-related problems.

The safety committee also communicates directly with management. This is done primarily through written recommendations and other safety committee minutes. Once again, the ability to run effective meetings, and write concise minutes and strong recommendations that provide useful information is critical in fulfilling this purpose. In some instances, the safety committee may be quick to accuse management of a lack of support when, in reality, the safety committee, itself, is not providing useful information enabling management to take timely action on recommendations.

The key to ensuring that safety committee is able to fulfill both communications purposes above is, of course, quality education and training.

What is the “function” of the safety committee?

Purpose and function are related terms, but differ significantly in meaning. Our dictionary definition states that "function" is:

- Something closely related to another thing and dependent on it for its existence, value, or significance.

Whereas "purpose" states the intended result or effect, "function" describes the actual or unintended result or effect. The actual outcome depends on the success of the attempt to carry out the intended purpose. If the safety committee does not effectively carry out its intended purpose, it may unintentionally function to hurt the company's safety and health effort.

Function can be considered a dependent variable. It is dependent upon the effectiveness of a group to follow through with its stated purpose. The safety committee may have the best intentions, but if it cannot follow through effectively with its plans, it may actually function to harm a safety program or activity rather than help it. Without education and training, safety committee members may not have the basic knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform their responsibilities. Given proper education and training, the safety committee is more likely to function to carry out its intended purpose.

For instance, the safety committee may intend to increase interest in safety by implementing a safety incentive program, but if its members do not have the knowledge, skills, or abilities to accomplish this purpose, they may develop a totally reactive incentive program that results in a dismal failure. The lesson -- It's not good enough just to do the right thing...you've got to do the right thing right!

Some important points to remember about the safety committee's "function":

- Function describes the actual result or effect of a safety committee activity, whether intended or the unintended.
- Function is a dependent variable: It depends on the stated purpose and the ability of the safety committee to carry it out as an activity.
- Given the tools, the safety committee can function to properly carry out its purposes.

So, why is it so important to understand the relationship between purpose and function? The safety committee may have wonderful goals and objectives that support its intended purposes. But, if the safety committee does not have the ability, for whatever reason, to meet those goals, it will have great difficulty in carrying out its stated purpose. The safety committee may actually (unintentionally) function to hurt, not help its safety program.

These three concepts are actually not too difficult to understand, but that understanding is absolutely essential to your ability to be an effective member of a safety committee, and to the overall success of the committee.

Chapter Exercises

1. Discuss the advantages to an organization when the safety committee performs the role of a consultant rather than cop.
2. Evaluate your safety committee on how well it's fulfilling its purpose.
3. Discuss what this statement means: "The safety committee may have the best intentions, but that does not guarantee effective results."

Chapter TWO: GETTING STARTED

Introduction

Don't pass this Chapter up just because you already have a safety committee!

This Chapter is designed to help you if you're trying to start a new safety committee in your company. However, if you already have a safety committee, be sure to complete this Chapter because you'll still receive some good information to help you further develop your safety committee's effectiveness. At a minimum, it will be a great review for you.

First things first...sell the idea to the boss

Let's say your company does not presently have a safety committee. You're convinced that the company would benefit if it started one, but how do you sell the idea to the CEO?

You've got to the "\$\$ talk bottom line \$\$" to get management's attention

An effective safety committee may not only help prevent employees' from getting hurt or killed on the job, it may help decrease future direct and indirect accident costs. An effective safety committee is a **profit center**, not a cost center for the company.

What are the bottom-line benefits of a safety committee?

- The safety committee performs the role of a **consultant** to the employer. If your employer hired an external consultant it would cost thousands of dollars long-term for the same service the safety committee can provide in-house.
- The safety committee acts as a forum for management and labor to communicate safety related concerns. The benefits from improved communications may be hard to quantify, but they may be substantial.
- Every hazard the safety committee identifies and is directly involved in eliminating results in significant savings in potential accident costs. We'll talk more about this later.
- The safety committee can serve as a valuable problem solving group that addresses workplace conditions, morale and quality. By developing solutions, the safety committee improves the company's competitive advantage.