Roles of Health and Safety Committees

A health and safety committee can be an important way to improve conditions on the job. The committee provides a forum for employees and management to work together to solve health and safety problems. An effective committee can help prevent injury and illness on the job; increase awareness of health and safety issues among workers, supervisors, and managers; and develop strategies to make the work environment safe and healthy.

The following is a list of some possible roles of a health and safety committee.

Hazard Identification, Evaluation, and Control

- Review injury data, accident reports, and workers’ compensation records.
- Conduct regular walkthrough inspections to identify potential health and safety hazards.
- Conduct safety and health job analyses to identify problems.
Hazard Identification, Evaluation, and Control

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- Design and conduct health and safety surveys.
- Collect and review Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs).
- Propose and evaluate various ways to improve safety conditions.
- Get recommendations acted upon.
- Review and evaluate corrective actions taken by management.
- Temporarily “shut down” unsafe operations until a hazard is corrected.
- Collect and review information on new chemicals, procedures, and processes before they are introduced.
- Participate in studies conducted by outside researchers or consultants.
- Establish or improve procedures for employees to report safety hazards or suggest improvements without fear of reprisal.

Information and Education

- Respond to concerns raised by workers, supervisors and managers.
- Recommend training for new employees, supervisors, and managers and refresher training on health and safety practices, procedures and emergency response.
- Plan and organize training programs.
- Establish or improve procedures for employees to report health symptoms without fear of reprisal.
- Keep workers, supervisors, and managers informed about the committee’s activities.
Accident/Incident Investigations

- Investigate accidents, including their root causes.
- Establish procedures for reviewing reports of all safety incidents, including accidents, illnesses and deaths.
- Review accident/incident reports and make recommendations for appropriate corrective action.
- Develop systems for reporting accidents and “near misses.”

Safety and Health Planning

- Establish procedures to review inspection reports.
- Recommend and track new safety and health rules and work practices.
- Review proposed equipment purchases and make recommendations.
- Regularly review and evaluate the employer’s Injury and Illness Prevention Program (IIPP).
- Develop a tracking system that enables the committee to monitor progress on safety issues.
Making Health and Safety Committees Effective

Committee Membership and Procedures

- Make sure there is equal representation of workers and managers.
- Have workers or their union pick their own representatives.
- Make sure there are senior managers on the committee who have the authority to make decisions.
- Choose members who will be active and productive team players. Both management and employee representatives should be fully committed to the committee’s work.
- Make sure management and employee representatives share responsibility for setting agendas and goals, chairing meetings, and taking on specific tasks.
- Agree on guidelines for effective communication and mutual respect among committee members.
- Establish procedures for employees to report hazards or suggest safety improvements to the committee without fear of reprisal.
Resources Needed

- Secure support from all levels of the organization to commit adequate time and resources to make the committee successful.

- Make sure all members receive enough training to be effective on the committee.

- Provide adequate paid work time for members to attend meetings and carry out their committee responsibilities.

- Ensure that committee members have access to the worksite and to all relevant information necessary to carry out their duties.

- Use outside experts, as needed.

Planning the Meeting

- Plan the meeting with management and worker representatives, including prioritizing the topics that should be covered and when and where the meeting will be held.

- Send the agenda and other relevant committee information to committee members and other interested parties at least five days prior to the meeting.

- Review minutes from the last meeting and check on the status of any pending actions.

- Review any concerns and suggestions from workers or supervisors so they can be brought to the committee.
Running a Productive Meeting

- Start on time.

- Establish the ground rules:
  - Ensure there is agreement on process. For example, will disagreements be resolved by formal votes?
  - Maintain open and balanced discussion, and make sure everyone has an equal chance to speak.
  - Define and agree upon roles and responsibilities.
  - Keep the focus on safety and health issues. Do not allow personal attacks.

- Seek approval of the agenda by participants. Revise if needed.

- Introduce new members and guests.

- Set clear time limits for discussion of agenda items.

- Review action items from the previous meeting.

- Try to make progress on smaller steps while working toward larger objectives.

- Keep good minutes of the meeting to document decisions made.

- Establish action items and responsibilities: Who, what, and when?

- Set the date, time, and place of the next meeting, and develop a preliminary agenda.

- Evaluate the meeting. Were expectations met? Was the agenda followed? Were problems resolved? Can future meetings be improved?

- Close the meeting on time and on a positive note.

Meeting Follow-up

- Prepare the meeting minutes.

- Distribute and/or post the minutes.

- Follow up on action items and publicize your successes.
Role Play: A Difficult Committee Meeting

Setting: A health and safety committee meeting.

Characters:
- Pablo: Company risk manager (management representative)
- Joan: Senior supervisor (management representative)
- Maria: Experienced employee (labor representative)
- David: Newer employee (labor representative)

Pablo: OK. Let’s get started. I think I can get us out of here pretty quickly. There isn’t too much on the agenda. Could everyone please sign the attendance sheet?

Joan: Were we supposed to get an agenda? I didn’t see one.

Maria: It doesn’t matter; we never really talk about anything anyway.

Joan: Well, this is my first meeting and I’d really like to know what we are responsible for here.

Maria: We just listen to the same old reports. I’ve tried to tell Pablo that there really are some things folks are concerned about, but we never talk about them or follow up. Right, David?

David: Huh? Sorry, I wasn’t really listening. I worked late and had to stay around for this meeting after my shift.

Pablo: Maria was saying that there are a lot of complaints out there. Is that right? If people have problems they really should let me know. That’s my job. I can’t keep things safe if nobody will speak up!

David: I don’t really know. I’m not here to make waves. In fact, I don’t even know why I got picked for this committee.

Joan: This doesn’t feel very productive. I don’t think any of us can afford to be wasting our time. Speaking of which, where are the rest of the senior managers? I thought we were all supposed to be on this committee.

Pablo: We can’t afford to release so many senior managers. I can just send my report to everyone by email.

Joan: Maybe for the next meeting we could get everyone to attend and talk about what we are supposed to be doing here.

Maria: And talk about some of the safety concerns we have?

Pablo: Fine, let’s adjourn for now.
Preparing for the Next Meeting

DIRECTIONS:

Each “character” in the role play now gets a group consultation. Your small group should help your character prepare for the next meeting.

1. Brainstorm a list of suggestions for making the committee work more effectively.

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2. Select your top three recommendations to present at the next committee meeting.

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3. Pick someone who will role play your character at the meeting. This may or may not be the person who played the character during the original role play.

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4. Help that person prepare to present your group’s recommendations and discuss them with other members of the committee at the meeting. Remember that your character should be ready to argue persuasively because other committee members may not agree.

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