Safety Committees: A Fix or a Fixture?

BY SANDY SMITH
WHEN IT COMES TO CONDUCTING safety meetings, there is no getting around the requirement to do so from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. But if the approach is merely to check off a federal regulation, it may be a missed opportunity to improve employee morale and positively impact the bottom line. That’s where an active and engaged safety committee can come in.

“Safety committee members are the safety manager’s eyes and ears out on the floor. They will point out when a guard is off or a machine is not operating properly,” said Thomas Schneid, J.D., chair of the Department of Safety and Security and a tenured professor in the School of Safety, Security and Emergency Management at Eastern Kentucky University. “They’ll talk to the safety manager, get maintenance brought in and get the issue taken care of before the motor on the washer burns up. It also has an impact on employee morale and recruiting. Nobody wakes up and says, ‘I want to work in a laundry.’ However, when safety committee members and employees are actively engaged and management listens to their concerns, safety becomes a priority and the workplace is enjoyable. When the word gets out that your workplace is safe and a great place to work, this can help in recruiting new employees.”

To get that level of engagement, though, requires more on the part of management than simply ensuring that the committee meets on a regular basis.

First Things First

Understand that union shops may have many of the details of the safety committee contained in the collective bargaining agreement (CBA). Some state plans may also have requirements related to safety committees as well. So it’s best to ensure that any changes you make in the safety committee structure align with the CBA and/or state regulations as a starting point.

Schneid says that, while every situation is different, there are a few commonalities when it comes to creating effective safety committees. “You have to start with an understanding that this is the employees’ voice in the safety area,” he said. “You want them to be able to come into the committee with no pressures on them, to be free to represent the employees within their area.”

Schneid recommends that committee members be chosen by their peers, if possible. “That’s where people who are passionate about safety will put their name in to serve on the committee. It’s a lot better than someone being at the meeting because they are told to be there.”

He believes the best committees include a representative from each area and that those people are “passionate about safety and enthusiastic about getting things done.”

“I’ve tried to provide educational and training opportunities for safety committee members and structure the meetings so that it doesn’t turn into a complaint session,” he said. “They come in with their list: ‘This wasn’t repaired. That wasn’t repaired.’ I’d like to get beyond that, to where we’re educating and training our committee members.”

Perhaps the easiest way to move beyond complaints is to ensure follow-up on any issue raised by a committee member. This can be an important way of making employees feel heard.

“That’s one of the biggest mistakes companies make with their safety committees. The structure is there, but it is ineffective,” Schneid said. “When the committee member brings the issue in to the meeting and there’s no feedback, the next month, they come in with a longer list. It is essential to provide feedback on a regular basis. Although the feedback may not be what the committee member would like to hear, the act of simply providing feedback is important. Safety committee members and employees understand, as long as they see that there’s effort put toward to address their issue and that safety is of the utmost concern.”
Schneid recommends that safety committee members be given a timeframe, when appropriate, for issues such as equipment repair. The committee member should be encouraged to share this information with affected employees, and encourage them to let him/her know if it is not completed by the expected time frame. “It is giving feedback to the employees as well as giving the committee member a certain amount of authority and support for management.”

**Taking it to the Next Level**

A robust safety committee program extends well beyond the meeting—and ideally keeps safety at the forefront of every shift.

Engaged employees can—and should—be the eyes and ears of the safety manager within the operations. While most committees meet once a month, Schneid said, in an ideal world, there are almost “daily interactions between the committee and the safety officer. It’s building that relationship between the committee and the safety professional,” Schneid said. “You’re building a level of trust that is definitely beneficial in the long run.”

That can mean a shift in attitude that “this is not the safety manager’s safety program. It’s the employees’ safety program. Most people think, ‘It’s a safety program, take it to the safety manager.’ It’s more of an attitude of, ‘It’s your safety program. How do you want to address the safety issue?’”

The safety manager does have an important role in ensuring that the committee is effective and feels appreciated. “If employees feel this is a waste of their time, they’re not going to put any effort in,” Schneid said. A simple show of appreciation, such as having doughnuts or pizza at the safety committee meeting, can ensure attendance and serve as a thank you for participants.

“From an employee’s perspective, they’re getting off the job for an hour. From your perspective, they are your eyes and ears,” Schneid said. “I try to take care of those people in there. Be very positive, very upbeat all the way through. Thank them for their efforts. Try to make them an extension of the safety office.”

Of course, a safety officer can’t be in every portion of the operation on every shift. The safety committee members can help extend that role, not only as a conduit to the safety officer, but also by having each employee know who their committee representative is.

“In certain organizations, we’ve identified safety committee members in different ways,” Schneid said. “Maybe they wear a specific color hard hat or are identified through a patch for their uniform so that people know to go to them.”

That’s where it becomes somewhat circular in nature: The employee knows to go to the safety committee member, who in turn shares information with the safety manager. Once an issue has been identified, the safety manager ensures that the safety committee member knows what, if any, action has been taken. The safety committee member then shares that with the employee. Ideally, much of this happens outside the confines of the monthly meeting.

**Changing the Culture**

Realized that your facility has missed the mark in creating a robust safety committee? These tips from the National Safety Council can help you shift directions:

- **Set the vision.** Communicate why you are emphasizing safety. Tell them what a safe work environment looks like. Help them understand the importance of the changes to business goals as well as to employee safety.

- **Establish a core team to lead the change.** This may be comprised of an existing safety committee—if you feel that they are willing to embrace changes. If not, create a change committee that can communicate the need for change and address the concerns.

- **Ensure that leadership models appropriate behavior.** Employees are more likely to embrace changes if they see that management believes in the effort.

**Benefits to Bottom Line**

When the safety committee works well, it can pay dividends in terms of workers compensation or related costs. Schneid has been exploring the financial dividends that come with a “happy employee.”

“If your employees are happy in the workplace, you’ll have fewer OSHA complaints or related issues,” Schneid said. “You’ll have employees that have the company’s best interest at heart compared to those who are just punching a time card.”

Employees who feel their concerns are heard are less likely to escalate those concerns to OSHA, Schneid believes. “The number one reason OSHA shows up is from a complaint.”
When employees are doing their job for eight hours a day, five or six days a week and they encounter a safety issue, there is an expectation the issue will be addressed. The employee informs the supervisor and nothing is done. The employee may go to the safety manager. Nothing’s been done and there is no feedback. The employee’s only alternative is to go outside the organization to address the issue. And this often means a visit from OSHA or another governmental agency."

In August 2016, OSHA increased its maximum penalty from $7,000 to $12,471 and from $70,000 to $124,709 for willful violations. OSHA defines “willful” as a violation “in which the employer either knowing failed to comply with a legal requirement or acted with plain indifference.

While OSHA fines are not insignificant, it’s just the tip of what an OSHA inspection can bring. “During a compliance inspection, what will employees say about your safety program?” Schneid said. “When an employee tells a compliance officer, ‘I told the company this was an issue,’ what perception does this provide regarding your company’s safety program?”

OSHA also changed its reporting of injuries and illnesses recordkeeping rule. It is important that safety managers and safety committees are up-to-date with these new recordkeeping requirements. Additionally, Schneid would caution utilizing this information with a safety committee because of privacy laws and reasons. “If the company is going to share injury and illness data with the safety committee, it should be broad and not identify the employee specifically,” he said. “It may be as simple as ‘We’ve had an incident with an ironer and the investigation found that the guard was missing. Please check the guards on the equipment in your area.’"

Beyond that, though, looking back at injuries that have occurred is “reactive, not proactive. The safety committee needs to be more involved before something happens,” Schneid said. “I’d rather train the safety committee members to conduct safety inspections and identify potential risks in their area rather than looking over paperwork after the fact.”

Ultimately, making the most of a safety committee may require changing the views of the culture of safety within the facility. It can mean ensuring that employees—who do the job daily—keep safety at the forefront.

“The safety committee is an extremely good advocate for safety out on the floor,” Schneid said. “We want to educate and train them to achieve this cultural shift in their thinking. If you can get the safety committee to make this shift, they can pass it on to their fellow employees. Your safety committee can be one of, if not the top, asset your company can employ.”

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5 Elements of Successful Safety Programs

While each safety program is tailored to the specifics of its company, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has identified five elements that each program should contain:

- **Management leadership and employee participation.** Management’s role ensures that the safety program has the resources to organize and control activities. Employees should commit to achieving the program’s goals and objectives.

- **Workplace analysis.** The company conducts worksite surveys periodically and analyzes routine job hazards.

- **Hazard prevention and control.** Effective design of the job site or job is used to prevent workplace hazards where feasible. When not feasible, hazards are controlled to prevent unsafe or potentially harmful exposure.

- **Safety and health training and education.** Training ensures that employees understand the hazards to which they may be exposed and methods for avoiding those hazards.

- **Program evaluation.** Any safety program should be evaluated for effectiveness. OSHA recommends at least annual evaluation.