



'Culture Drives Behavior'

Effective safety committees build a strong safety culture

Many safety professionals believe safety starts at the top, with a strong commitment from executive management. Although securing that commitment is critical, building a strong safety culture also requires rank-and-file buy-in. A well-run safety committee with clear objectives can help employers get their front-line employees on board.

"In order to create a positive safety culture, there has to be leadership from the grass roots," said Steve Simon, president of Larchmont, NY-based Culture Change Consultants. "Most traditional safety committees focus more on compliance than on safety culture, but it's possible to train committee members to focus on the culture, and not only focus on physical hazards and training programs."

What makes a safety culture so vital? According to Simon, culture either supports or undermines safety programs; it drives safe behaviors or unsafe behaviors.

"The metaphor I always use is that of a stew bubbling on a stove," Simon said. "The elements of your safety program are all the ingredients. But the culture is the broth it's stewing in. You can have the best ingredients in your stew but if the broth is rancid, what's going to happen?"

BUILDING YOUR COMMITTEE

Investing in a safety committee can save employee lives and can save employers money. The first step to putting a committee together or revamping an existing team is deciding who should participate.

Safety experts agree that the best route is to seek employees who are passionate about safety. According to Amy Stewart, CSP, seeking volunteers helps ensure that employees sign up because they are sincerely dedicated to improving safety in their workplace. Stewart holds a master's degree in safety and is a consultant to Highland Local Schools, a rural public school district in eastern Ohio.

David Amos, senior consultant for occupational safety and health services for the National Safety Council, agreed that volunteers are the best option. "If you just saddle an employee with that responsibility, are they really going to be effective for the organization? No – they'll look at it as a burden and a punishment, and it shouldn't be."

Amos said many safety committees are structured with no real guidelines or clear objectives, sometimes to fulfill labor agreement requirements or workers' compensation procedures. Defining objectives has an impact on determining which volunteers should participate. "Once we have identified a purpose, we can go about seeing how we can fulfill that purpose and determine the role of each member," he said. The organization should train committee members to ensure each member has the necessary knowledge and skills.

According to Amos, front-line workers and supervisors tend to be the most familiar with procedures – and problems – that exist in the workplace. Your committee will be more effective if you can empower those people and get them involved, he said.

Consultant Amy Stewart recommended that the top decision-maker in your facility be an active member of the safety committee, to demonstrate that safety is a priority for management.

Culture Change Consultants' Simon said although the committee should include leaders, a leader may



not necessarily be a high-ranking person in the organization. "The first criterion for a leader is to have followers. Being a leader in your own mind is not the same as being someone that others come to for direction," he said.

Another key element to a safety committee, according to Simon, is dissent. You want to stack the deck with members in favor of building a better safety culture, but you should have a few who think the committee should take a different approach, to ensure different points of view are represented.

COMMITTEE DUTIES

Once your committee has a defined purpose and members who have had the necessary training, they can get to work. The specific duties of the safety team should accurately address the goals and objectives of the team. Specific duties should change as the goals and objectives of the safety team change over time.

Engagement is the chief criterion for a successful committee that is geared for improving overall safety culture, according to Simon. The safety committee should be engaged constantly with the other workers on the floor, talking to them about what is working, what is not working and helping to keep safety at the forefront of their minds.

Stewart, consultant to Highland Local Schools, said that safety committee members can become the "go-to people" when a safety-related problem or hazard arises. Front-line workers may feel more comfortable approaching a safety committee member than they would approaching top management.

Stewart also recommended making the committee's activities public. Place meeting agendas, action plans and meeting minutes on bulletin boards, the company intranet or other locations employees will be able to access them.

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