

Loss Prevention

MAINTAINING A SAFETY FOCUS WITHOUT A FORMAL COMMITTEE

Safety committees, when designed to address an organization's risks, needs and exposures, can go a long way to manage the employer's safety program and prevent workplace injuries and illnesses. However, for small or understaffed companies, creating and maintaining a formal safety committee can be a challenge. This is especially true for contractors, with employees in the field and office staff working remotely.

Successful safety committees work best when they have a specific focus – perhaps one, or a limited number of goals. A new committee may be charged with adopting or revising an existing safety or loss prevention program. Others may be addressing an important safety issue (such as falls from heights), complying with mandates, or analyzing loss data to identify an upsurge in claim or litigation frequency or severity. A committee may be responding to a recommendation made by the entity's insurer, senior management or in response to a request by employees or a collective bargaining unit.

Safety experts point to these factors when identifying successful safety committees:

- Endorsed by senior management
- Defined agenda
- Resources and authority
- Mixed membership – both employees and managers
- Strong leadership
- Consistent schedule and formal agenda
- Accountability

Creating a Centralized Safety Function Without a Committee

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020 data), employers in the construction field with less than 50 employees experienced a higher average incident rate for nonfatal injuries than larger employers, with the exception of establishments with 50-249 employees. Small employers can still have the benefits of a safety committee even if they cannot support an ongoing series of committee meetings. This can be accomplished by using existing employee, department or management meetings.

- Employee meetings typically focus around issues not related to safety or loss prevention. Make safety/loss prevention a permanent agenda item. This creates an ongoing opportunity to discuss and inform employees about matters not usually shared to workers, such as, loss trending, regulatory (OSHA or local government) changes, and safety issues arising from new equipment, materials or procedures. Necessary training can be arranged and employee input can be solicited. By making it a permanent agenda item, it has to be addressed and not ignored or forgotten.

- Department meetings usually focus on issues particular to a single department or function. Safety and loss prevention topics would be fashioned for the unit holding the meeting. This allows management to arrange training, or assign tasks needed based on unit's loss history or operations.
- Management meetings address issues at the enterprise or company-wide level. Owners and senior managers are responsible for the safety and loss prevention efforts of the company. In a small (or understaffed) company – it is more of a nitty-gritty approach. Company loss history, regulatory issues, changes in the insurance program, inspection results (insurer or regulatory), and safety-related communications from general contractors, owners and unions are considered at this level. The budget for training and personal protective equipment is established by senior management. In all three cases, video conferencing can replace in person meetings when needed.

The COVID-19 pandemic required organizations to quickly adapt to a one-in-a-lifetime public health emergency. Shutdowns, government mandates, moving to a remote workforce, and IT problems are some of the issues contractors had to address – all critical, relevant and immediate. Most were done creatively and effectively via video conferences and with remote workers. This same creative reasoning can be used to centralize and address the safety program if a separate committee is not possible.