

Straighten up!

How to keep your safety committee from going off kilter

By Gary A. Higbee, CSP, MBA

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I was once asked to do a safety audit for a company that manufactures dog food bags. It's surprising to see all that goes into making a simple bag. This one had the glossy outside we are used to seeing on a dog food bag, and a lining to prevent the oil in the food from seeping through. The liner had a little excess material sticking out of the bag, and this excess material was being trimmed by a sweeping, knife-like blade that continually moved back and forth over the bags as they came out of the machine.

The bags looked much like newspapers coming out of a high speed press. I was mesmerized by the operation, but noticed an employee acting a little strangely. He was rocking back and forth and looked like he was trying to time something. Suddenly, I saw the man thrust his hand into the machine to pull out a bag that had jammed. He was actually timing his reach between the rapid sweeping motions of the blade.

I have to admit I was shocked. I approached the worker and explained that he could easily lose his hand if he made even the smallest error in timing. "I'm very fast and coordinated," he said, and didn't seem to understand the danger he was in. He said the only alternative would be to turn the machine off, and that would mean a long re-start process and 20 to 30 scrapped bags.

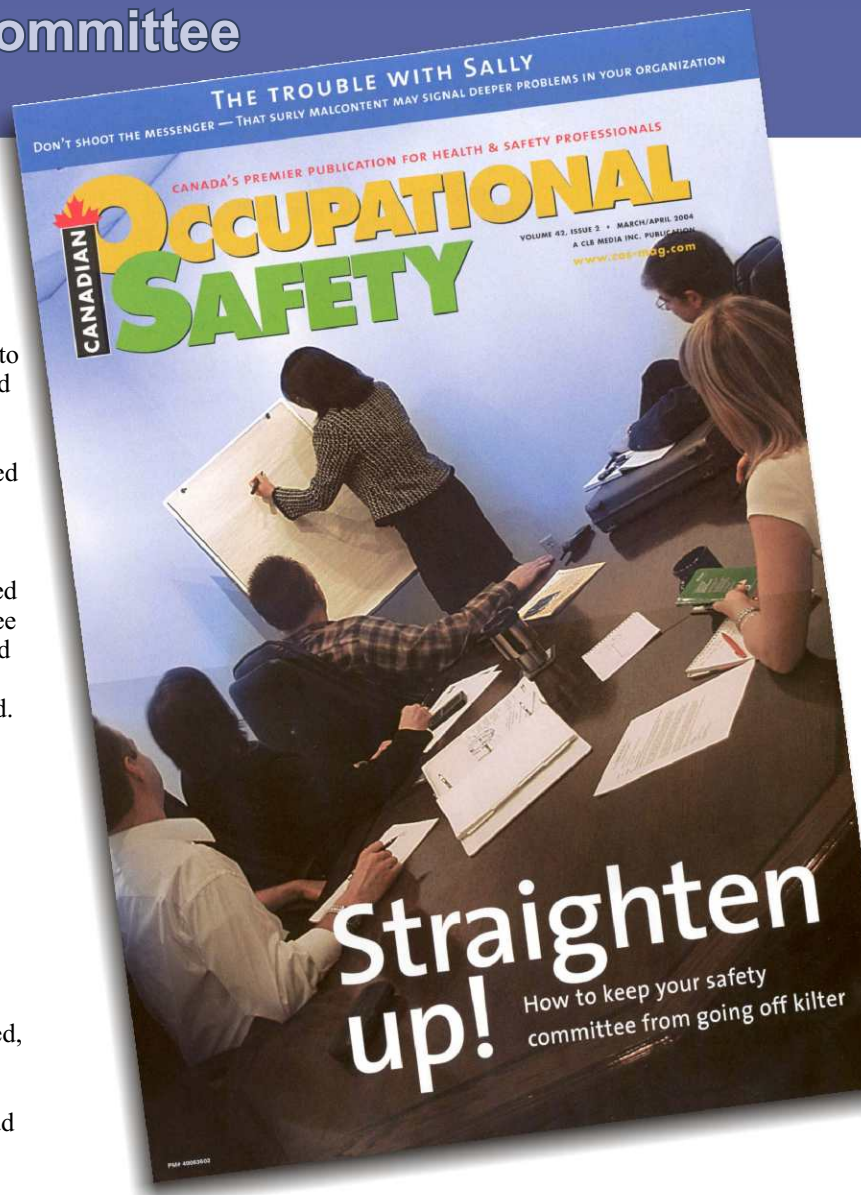
I asked who had taught him to remove bags that way. He answered, "Fred, the set-up man."

So I set out to find Fred. When I found him, guess what? Fred had no right hand. He had lost it in the machine next to the one I had just observed.

That bag manufacturing company, believe it or not, had a safety committee. This example illustrates something I have believed for a long time - that a health and safety committee has to develop a strong safety culture in the organization. Poor attitudes about health and safety are passed along in the workplace, just as good attitudes and a strong safety culture are passed along.

A health and safety committee can be an effective tool for improving safety performance. Just establishing a committee, however, does not guarantee its success. It takes a lot of hard work and an organizational plan to give the committee a chance to achieve the goal of fewer accidents and a safe workplace.

A committee's organizational plan can be explained best through a simple system I designed years ago to help both seasoned and new safety committees that were having trouble getting back on track. I call this system "The 4 Rs." Each of the Rs (Representation, Responsibility, Rotation and Results) is critical to the success of a safety committee.



Representation

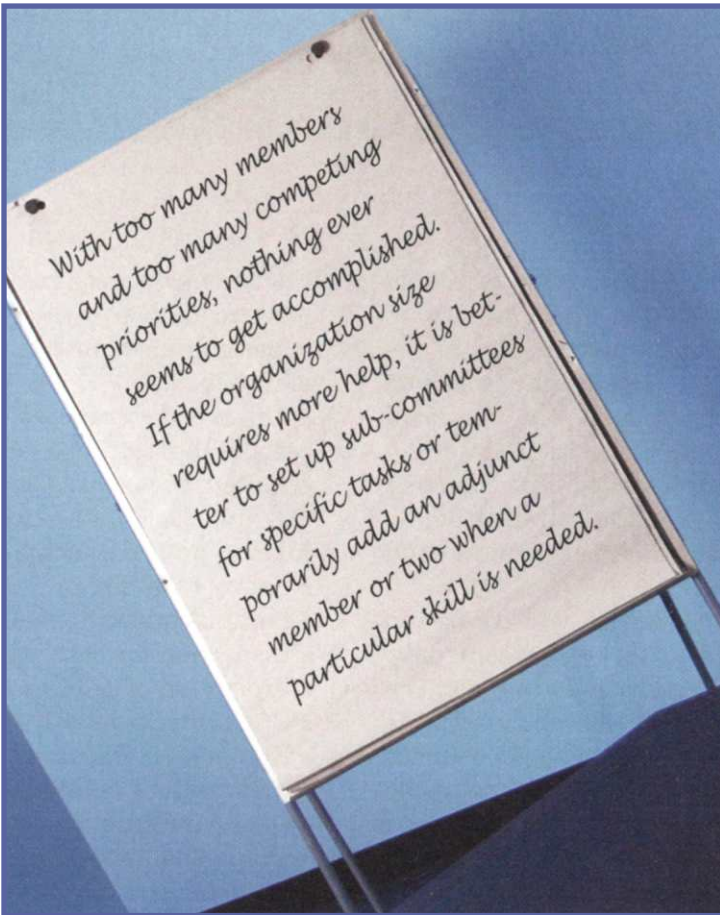
Someone on the committee must be designated for each natural division of the organization. For example, a facility may already consist of logical divisions based on process, operation, department, division, work type, building, etc. These natural divisions can make the selection of a representational structure easy. If there are no such natural divisions, or if representing each of the divisions will make the committee too large, you can create your own divisions. Everyone in the company should feel they are represented on the committee.

The process for selecting committee members and deciding how many are needed is a little more difficult. Having worked with committees of all sizes, I have noticed that the most effective committees are rather small in numbers, no matter how many employees they represent. Committees consisting of between five

and eight members seem to accomplish the most. I've seen committees of a dozen or more, and they really flounder when making decisions. The committee has to make decisions on the allocation of resources, and set priorities. With too many members and too many competing priorities, nothing ever seems to get accomplished. If the size of the organization warrants more help, it's better to set up sub-committees for specific tasks or temporarily add an adjunct member or two when a particular skill is needed.

Determining who should be on a safety committee can be tricky. It's easy to simply take volunteers, but a word of caution: You will often find that employees who lobby aggressively for a place on the committee will bring along an agenda that does not represent all employees. With this type of member the committee is in for some turf battles that could kill the whole process. In union shops, the selection process is often negotiated as part of the contract, and management has little or no say in the selection process. In the United States there have even been some National Labor Relation Board rulings against companies who unilaterally appointed safety committee members in a union shop. The company and the union or worker representatives should work together to achieve buy-in into the process. The workforce must understand and agree to the representative model.

Once everyone agrees on a representational model, you are free to start soliciting members. Remember, this is for volunteers only. Never force someone onto the committee. Employees forced onto the committee will not, as a rule, perform well. They can even undermine the committee. As you solicit members they are going to want to know just what they are supposed to be doing. Here we come to the second of the four Rs:



Responsibility

Exactly what activities will the committee perform? The members' responsibilities should be spelled out very specifically. I often select a few company and labor representatives to help develop committee job descriptions, just so everyone on the committee and all the employees they represent know just what they are expected to do. For the new safety committee, the responsibilities must be straightforward and give the committee a clear safety focus. Reasonably experienced committees may eventually rewrite and expand the list of duties.

Often a new committee starts out simply investigating accidents, responding to employee complaints or investigating near misses. Granted, these tasks are simply reactive activities, but they are easy learning tools and a good place to start. The committee might also take on proactive activities, which may include the following:

- **Safety training;**
- **Lockout process development and audits;**
- **Inspection for both unsafe conditions and unsafe acts;**
- **Promotion of safety awareness;**
- **Promotion of health and safety at home;**
- **Ergonomics training and process evaluation;**
- **New process and equipment review; and**
- **Observation safety training audits.**

While the list of opportunities is almost endless, if the committee tries to take on too many tasks, it will do none of them well. The committee will need time to learn and grow in experience and ability. Doing a few tasks well is a lot better than doing many tasks poorly. I would recommend that new committees limit their initial effort to one reactive and one proactive task as a start. This same approach also works well when a seasoned committee has realized it is not getting the job done and needs to reorganize.

You cannot just turn the committee loose without training members on their responsibilities. The training may be as simple as having the safety director give a talk, or as involved as comprehensive workshops by an expert in the field. No matter how great the training may be, however, I have never seen a committee that could perform all of its newly-learned functions well. I recommend training only for the duties the committee has committed to. This will give members an opportunity to apply their new skills and improve their performance through practice and repetition.

As the committee gains confidence and members' skills improve, they will be able to accept some more difficult assignments. They will need training for each new assignment.

The third R allows more employees to participate on the committee over time, and to spread a high level of safety awareness and responsibility throughout the organization:

Rotation

Safety committee membership is seldom a full-time job. Rotating committee members will give you the opportunity to involve more employees in the safety process. You don't want to simply give away all the expertise that the committee has developed through training and practice, but you still want to give others the chance to contribute and learn. A balance of experienced and new members is important. If, for example, the most senior member rotates off every six months, at the start of each membership cycle on a committee of seven we would have the following mix of seniority:

- **0 months**
- **6 months**
- **12 months**
- **18 months**
- **24 months**
- **30 months**
- **36 months**

Under this scenario we maintain the significant experience the committee has gained and mix in some fresh ideas and excitement. It is very difficult for people whose term on the committee has ended to ignore the very issues they have worked on or the experience they have gained. Employees learn a great deal about safety while on the committee, and they take that knowledge back to their regular work. Past members are a great source of support and a constant positive safety influence on their co-workers. Companies that rotate committee members normally see the most improvement in safety performance.

Results

To be respected within the organization and looked upon as a worthwhile entity, the committee must generate successful projects and activities. While management is ultimately responsible for providing the necessary resources, the committee must make responsible recommendations. Keep your recommendations confined to safety issues, and be ready to justify them just as every other function of the organization has to. We do not get a free pass just because we're working for a noble cause. Our recommendations must be well thought-out and prioritized. Be ready to present the proposal in a business-like manner. The safety or engineering department will have people who can help you with this function. Where possible incorporate productivity, quality and cost containment gains into the proposal along with the safety issue. This will help gain approval.

Management must understand that if the committee continually makes recommendations and nothing ever gets done, the committee will soon become dysfunctional and ineffective. In turn the committee will figure out that making outlandish proposals will also lead to its demise. Everyone should benefit from the committee! Aim for success.

Any positive results must be made visible to the entire organization, and the best way to do this is through the meeting minutes. Besides being a vehicle for committee accountability, the meeting minutes help advertise the committee's efforts. Minutes should be posted on bulletin boards throughout the facility. People want to know that their requests and recommendations are at least being discussed and worked on. Posting minutes allows employees to track projects from introduction to completion. The minutes also announce when management has supported the committee on its recommendations, which leads to respect for the committee, a more cooperative environment and better safety performance for the organization.

Other points that contribute to a health and safety committee's success:

- 1 Set an example**
Both current and past committee members are highly visible safety role models. They must consistently follow all safety practices without fail or lose their credibility. "Safety credibility" should always be listed as a committee member requirement.
- 2 Give positive reinforcement to positive acts**
When people do things right, they should be complimented. Honor safe work. Positive reinforcement is a powerful motivator and will produce consistent results. Members must also work to avoid giving "positive reinforcement of negative acts". This can happen when we fail to see unsafe practices or simply ignore them. Not saying anything to address an unsafe condition or act is the same as giving permission to do things unsafely.
- 3 Serve proudly**
People should be proud to serve on the committee. Being an active and productive member of the committee is very important for their peers and the health of the organization.
- 4 Don't make promises you can't keep**
Committee members shouldn't make promises they can't keep or statements that aren't accurate. There's a big difference between telling someone "I'll take care of it" and something more measured like, "let me look into it a little more and I'll get back to you next week." The first answer indicates that you have the authority and resources to make a change, which may not be true. If you fail to deliver on a promise, your credibility and that of the entire safety committee is damaged. The second answer is almost always more appropriate.
- 5 Support each other**
Members should present a united front and always support each other. A true team effort and unity of purpose will help produce much better results.
- 6 Keep a big-picture perspective**
Committees need to remember that safety is part of the overall picture of the organization. A strong safety program needs to mesh with the whole organization and be considered an equal to productivity, quality and cost. Success in safety must always be measured in relation to the success of the overall enterprise.

Gary A. Higbee CSP, MBA

Gary A. Higbee CSP, MBA worked for over 32 years for John Deere & Company where he held assignments in safety, environmental, production and engineering. He was also the Corporate Safety Director for Maytag and Manager of Health, Safety & Environmental for the Budd Company Stamping and Frame Division.

Gary is a board Certified Safety Professional and has an MBA from the University of Iowa. Currently he is working towards a Ph.D. in Industrial Technology at Iowa State University.

Gary was recognized in 1993 as the Safety Professional of the Year by Region IV of the American Society of Safety Engineers. He is past chairman and long time member of the National Safety Council's Automotive, Tooling and Metal Working Section Executive Board. Gary is also active as an adjunct Professor at Iowa State University; business and safety consultant; and expert witness.

Gary has had a number of articles published, and is a member of the Editorial Advisory Board for Industrial Safety & Hygiene News.

Using close to 40 years of experience and a dry sense of humor Gary has become a nationally known speaker on safety, health, environmental and business issues.

Gary now acts as one of Electrolab Training System's primary consultants and trainers for the SAFESTART and SAFETRACK training programs.

You can reach Gary at (515)270-6623 or g.higbee@mchsi.com.

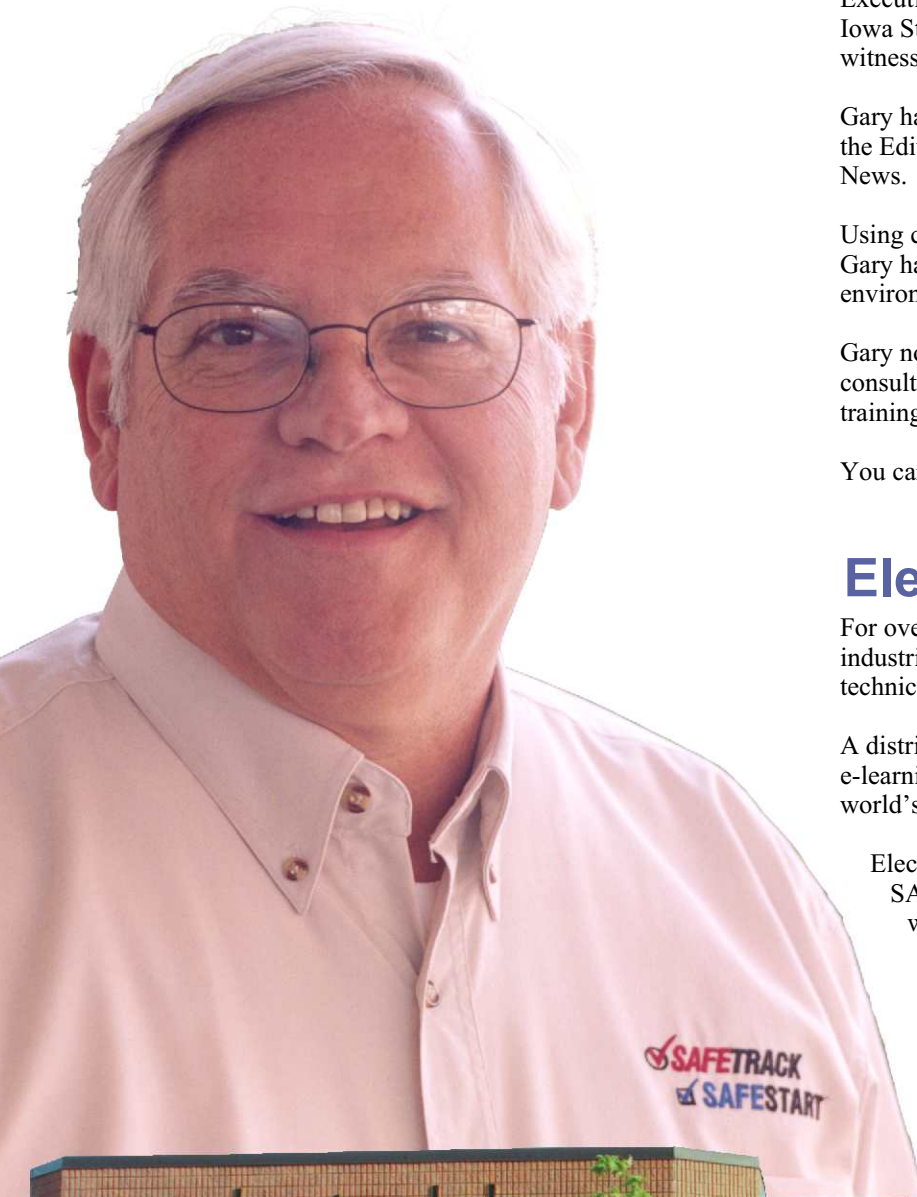
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Electrolab Training Systems
335 University Avenue • Belleville, ON • K8N 5A5
Tel: 1-800-267-7482 • Fax: 613-962-0284 • E-mail: safety@electrolab.ca