

Training and Leadership

The Secret to Effective Safety Committees - The Four R's

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INTRODUCTION

A health and safety committee can make an important difference in a company's safety efforts. That's why so many U.S. companies use them. And in Canada, they're mandatory. But like anything else, a committee works only when it's done right. In this series, Gary Higbee will explain the four R's of committee success.



Gary A. Higbee

The First R: Representation/Rightsizing

How many members should a committee have? I get asked this all the time. My answer: Enough members to make every part of the organization feel represented but not so many as to encumber the committee's work. Striking the right balance between representativeness and effectiveness can be tricky.

There should be somebody on the committee to represent each of the organization's natural divisions, e.g., process, operation, building, etc. But if there are too many divisions, it might be necessary to consolidate things for committee purposes. For example, it would be unwise to appoint one representative from each facility if your company has over 100 facilities.

Bigger Isn't Always Better

Having worked with committees of all sizes, I have noticed that the most effective committees are small in number, no matter how many employees they represent. Committees with between five and eight members seem to accomplish the most. Committees of a dozen or more, on the other hand, tend to have a hard time making decisions. As a result, they don't get much done.

My advice for organizations that want more help: Instead of adding members, set up sub-committees for specific tasks or at the most add temporary members as you need them.

Who Should Be on the Committee

Deciding who should be on the committee is also tricky. The simplest thing is to ask for volunteers. But be careful. I've found that the employees who lobby most aggressively to be on a committee often have an agenda that isn't representative of the other employees. Electing such members often leads to turf battles and in-fighting that limits the committee's overall effectiveness.

On the other hand, I have also found that it's a mistake to force employees to serve on a committee if they don't want to. Employees who get "conscripted" into committee duty don't perform well and may even undermine the committee's work.

If your employees belong to a union, selection of committee members may be dictated by the terms of the collective bargaining agreement. In addition, the federal National Labor Relations Board has ruled it unfair for companies to unilaterally appoint safety committee members. Bottom Line: The company and union need to work together to select an appropriate process and model for choosing members.

Editor's Note: *Next week, in Part 2 of this series, Gary discusses the second R of committee success: Responsibilities*