

Joint Health and Safety Committee – Structure of Meetings Fact Sheet



IS THE PURPOSE OF THE COMMITTEE CLEARLY DEFINED?

Roles and responsibilities of the committee are generally defined in health and safety legislation. In practical terms, specifying a purpose in simple terms is important since this purpose will help later to define the committee's duties and responsibilities. If too many objectives are specified, it can lead to members having different priorities and energy being spread in different directions at the same time. Examples of reasonable statements found in safety literature are:

- Create and maintain active interest in health and safety and to reduce incidents.
- Discuss and recommend effective actions to prevent workplace incidents.
- Promote an awareness of health and safety issues and an atmosphere of cooperation between management and workers.
- Help in identifying problems, formulating policy and procedures, monitoring and improving workplace health and safety.

Some jurisdictions have legislated to give the committee a degree of power to make decisions on health and safety matters. The end result is greater meaningful worker participation at the level where incidents and injuries happen. The declared purpose of the committee should be included in the company safety policy statement.

Is the committee's authority clearly defined?

The degree of committee's authority should be clearly defined and permanently recorded. When an individual or group is to be responsible for a set of activities, authority to carry out with those responsibilities must also be granted. A degree of responsibility is still necessary if the committee acts only in a consultative role. The provincial or federal law which made the requirement for a committee may also have declared a minimum amount of authority which that committee must have. Examples would be the right to carry out or participate in inspections and investigations, advise on refusal to do unsafe work cases, hold regular meetings, and monitor compliance with regulations. Check the appropriate legislation in your jurisdiction for what duties apply in your case.

An organization may expand on the minimum authority granted by legislation. Normally such increased authority does not extend to situations where a supervisor's responsibility might be overridden, such as correcting unsafe acts or shutting down an unsafe operation (unless imminent danger exists). However, a committee member should have the right to discuss the resolution of safety matters with any supervisor. As with all committee matters, the degree of authority should be resolved

through joint labour/management discussion.

However, the committee's main role is to make recommendations for action. The authority for action, and hence the accountability for non-compliance, stays with the employer. Establishing a committee does not lessen the employer's accountability or responsibility for health and safety.

To whom does the committee report?

The individual to whom the committee reports should be fully knowledgeable about committee duties, health and safety issues, and committed to the prevention of occupational injuries and illnesses. The best choice is usually a member of senior management since this person is most likely to be able to take direct action on problems presented to him/her.

Does the committee meet regularly?

A committee which does not meet on a regular basis will lose its drive, and will be perceived by workers and management to be of limited effectiveness. Some laws state that the committee must meet at least monthly or quarterly (every three months). Under certain circumstances, such as the initial stages of a newly formed committee or where extraordinary safety problems exist, it may be necessary to meet more often than the legal minimum. In organizations where conditions that cause incidents appear to be well managed, meeting time can be effectively used for additional health and safety education or training for the members.

Is full attendance achieved at meetings?

Committees should not be satisfied with just having a quorum at each meeting, but should strive for full attendance. Appoint alternates to the committee to help achieve this goal. Absenteeism leaves parts of the work force without representation, creates discontinuity in committee activities, indicates a lack of commitment to workplace safety, and reduces the credibility of the committee as a whole.

Are meetings frequently postponed?

Meetings should be scheduled well in advance, ideally for a set time of day and day of week to promote regular attendance and allow preparation time for committee members. Once the time and date is set, the meeting should not be postponed except for emergency reasons. Frequently postponed meetings will be seen as symptoms of lack of interest in safety, lack of management commitment, and lack of committee leadership.

What time of day are meetings held?

The timing of meetings may depend on factors which are difficult to control. For example, when different shifts have to be represented, a time immediately before or after a shift change might be best. Conflicts with the times when many key employees are most needed at their workstation should be avoided if possible. Whatever time is chosen, it should be the same for each meeting to promote attendance and to emphasize the importance of committee activities.

Where are meetings held?

Where available, a conference room equipped with appropriate training aids such as flip charts, chalk boards, and screens would be ideal. In any case, the area chosen should be one where meetings can be held under quiet, uninterrupted conditions.

Do meetings start and stop on schedule?

Like all important, well-organized meetings, those of the committee should start promptly at the designated time. Tardy starts are another warning sign of the lack of

interest or commitment by members. On the other hand, since committee members have other duties to perform, meetings should also close at the scheduled time.

Are meetings frequently interrupted?

No matter how carefully it is planned, any meeting which is frequently interrupted by telephone calls, texts or e-mails, people popping in to discuss something with individuals, or where committee members are called out of the room will degenerate into a state of disorganization. These disruptions may indicate that the meeting is not very important, and certainly secondary to the normal day-to-day activities in the company.

Is an agenda prepared for each meeting?

An agenda serves both as a guide to members' preparation for the meeting and as an outline for the order of business at the meeting itself. Items which might be considered are:

- Roll call.
- Introduction of visitors.
- Approval of minutes.
- Business arising from the minutes (including progress reports on outstanding items).
- Reports (inspections, incidents, statistics, etc.).
- New business (itemized).
- Educational/Training session.
- Time, date, place of next meeting.
- Adjournment.

What is the procedure for inclusion of new items of business on the agenda?

All employees (management and labour) should be encouraged to submit items to their committee representatives who in turn must be given the opportunity to present the items for discussion. However, since the committee has only a limited time to deal with all health and safety aspects, these items should be screened before the whole committee addresses them. Priorities might be established based on incident experience, inspection reports, or events such as the introduction of new equipment or procedures. Approval of agenda items could be made by the committee as a whole, but here the danger lies in spending too much time on discussing priorities rather than on actual health and safety problems. The decision might best be left to the discretion of the co-chair persons, as long as both labour and management are represented in the decision.

Is the agenda distributed to all members well before each meeting?

One of the reasons for preparing an agenda is to allow each member to prepare for the meeting. This preparation may involve discussions with the group that member represents, study of health and safety problems noted on the agenda, or gathering information. Each member needs to know the topics under consideration in order to contribute effectively at the meeting.

Is meeting time used in a productive manner?

A detailed agenda will help make sure that committee meetings proceed in an orderly manner but there are other considerations as well. The meeting should not be used as a forum for airing general complaints and grievances which have other channels for hearing. Disciplinary, human resources, and personnel matters should be left to normal line management, human resources/personnel department, and union staff to handle while the committee devotes its attention to health and safety matters.

Individual cases of unsafe acts or conditions (fix-it items) are matters which should

be routinely resolved through line management not through a health and safety committee. When such items keep recurring during committee meetings, it is an indication of unclear terms of reference or of individuals failing to carry out their responsibilities. These items only become an appropriate topic for committee action where an inspection reveals general noncompliance with safety rules/procedures, or when other means to effect corrective action have failed.

On the other hand, committee members must be aware of action taken to resolve cases of fix-it items in order to be able to share the information or to take further action as a committee. Disagreement is to be expected on some issues but these should be resolved in a non-adversarial manner based on known facts and logical thinking which lead to reasonable recommendations.

How are decisions reached at meetings?

All committee members should understand the manner in which decisions, recommendations, or future committee activities are made. As far as possible, decisions should be made by consensus building. Formal voting should be avoided if possible because of its inherent taking sides nature. No one individual should have veto power over what will be recommended. The ideal situation would be that consensus is reached through the process of allowing each person to present his/her arguments and having these debated by all committee members. Compromise solutions in the form of more than one recommendation, setting priorities, or involving interim measures may be the way out of a seemingly difficult situation. If general agreement can be achieved, post-decision support from the entire committee and all employees is more likely to follow. The decision-making process is a key element in determining committee unity and developing a spirit of cooperation necessary for it to operate effectively.

Are all items of unfinished or new business concluded by specific recommendations for action?

The main function of the committee is to put forward recommendations. By ending each discussion item with a specific recommendation, it is less likely that they will have to be addressed at meeting after meeting. As with any complex question, a useful way of checking how complete the response is to see if the questions: what? why? how? where? when? and who? are answered. The problem should be stated in clear terms based on known facts.

The committee should investigate problems thoroughly and try to find their root causes. The recommended solution must be logical, meet all legislative requirements, and be the best possible practical method. The location and time frame should be specified in the recommendation. In some cases, such as when a waiting period is expected while new equipment is purchased and installed, an interim solution may be required.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the individual(s) or group responsible for taking further action should be named.

Are comprehensive minutes of meetings kept?

The minutes of health and safety committee meetings are to keep track of safety problems and to state what recommendations have been made. Minutes also serve to promote safety to all workers and serve as a permanent record of health and safety committee activities. Items generally included are:

- Time and date of meeting.
- Who attended.
- Items discussed (reports, problems, statistics, education).
- Reasons for recommendations (and counter arguments voiced).
- Recommendations (specifying action by whom, by when).

- Time and date of next meeting.

The minutes should be brief and highlight all recommendations and decisions. The secretary should make notes during the meeting, using the agenda as a guide and write the minutes immediately after, while the proceedings are fresh in his/her memory. An exact copy of everything said is not required or desired, and the minutes should not be so long that they discourage workers from reading them. Minutes should maintain confidentiality for individuals as well.

Are the minutes available to management and committee members, and posted promptly for all workers to read?

Prompt posting of the minutes will show that solutions to safety problems have been followed-up without delay. It also indicates that the committee is operating efficiently, and emphasizes that safety is a priority item in the organization. Some jurisdictions require that specific forms and/or minutes be forwarded to the employer, regulatory agency, or organization representing the workers.

For what period of time are minutes kept on file?

Minutes of previous meetings are useful sources of information as they may show trends and reveal problems requiring more investigation, the training of new committee members, or the determination of safety training topics. The length of time they are kept may vary with the frequency of the meetings and other factors but a minimum of two years is suggested. In some cases, the jurisdiction has mandated a record retention time period.

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