Teaching Workers to Conduct Better Fire Safety Inspections

Safety Management Tools – Inspections

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Eliminating fire hazards is a central part of any workplace safety program. Among the most basic tasks is to ensure that: exits are free and unobstructed; there are appropriate fire extinguishers on hand; and workers are trained how to use the fire extinguishers in case of fire.

These seem like simple and straightforward requirements. But in operation, they often prove to be anything but. Alarming numbers of citations get issued because employers fail to carry out these tasks; sadly, such breakdowns also lead to fatalities.

The key to avoiding mistakes is to remain vigilant. You must be constantly on the lookout for such problems as obstructed exits and malfunctioning fire extinguishers, so you can discover problems ***before*** fire breaks out (or an OSHA inspector finds them for you). Like most employers, you might form your workers into fire safety teams and have them conduct regular inspections. That's a good start. But you also need to ensure those teams know what they're doing. That's a training imperative if you want them to conduct a meaningful inspection.

To meet it, don't simply count on workers to carry out what you teach them during training. Give them procedures and forms to ensure they do. Many safety directors say the key to optimizing the effectiveness of fire safety teams is to create a questionnaire that describes exactly what to check during each inspection. We've created a Model Questionnaire you can use for this purpose. Or, if you already have such a questionnaire, you can use our model as a guide for changes and improvements.

What the Law Requires

OSHA has several standards that address fire safety in the workplace. For example:

The Means of Egress Standard requires employers to ensure that exits are available to escape from fires and other emergencies. Among other things, each exit must be clearly visible and continuously maintained so that it's free of obstructions or impediments.

The Portable Fire Extinguishers Standard sets requirements governing the placement, use, maintenance and testing of portable fire extinguishers to be used by workers. Among other things, portable fire extinguishers must be mounted, located and identified so that they're readily accessible. They must also be fully operable and

visually inspected at least once a month. Workers expected to use fire extinguishers must also be trained how to do so.

Benefits of Questionnaire

Forming fire inspection teams is a good way to ensure compliance with these requirements. And providing those teams a questionnaire is a good way to ensure they do their inspections effectively. Our Model Questionnaire helps:

Standardize inspections: Distributing the Questionnaire will ensure that each team is checking for the same things and asking the same questions—the ones you mandate. This results in standardization of inspection results which facilitates analysis of the data. For example, it enables you to compare different departments within a single facility or to monitor the same department on an ongoing basis.

Keep inspections short and focused: Fire inspection duties, although vitally important, also diminish "productive time." That puts pressure on the safety director to keep fire safety inspections short, sweet and to the point. A well-organized Questionnaire enables team members to do an appropriate inspection and then get back to their regular jobs as quickly as possible.

Identify and correct problems early: A Questionnaire can be tailored to the unique problems of your facility or operations. For example, if your fire exit is near loading docks, you can design the Questionnaire to ensure team members go out of their way to verify any loaded materials aren't being kept nearby.

Build fire safety awareness: One of the benefits of having fire safety teams conduct inspections is that it builds awareness not just among team members but other workers in areas undergoing inspection. A well-designed Questionnaire can maximize the awareness-building function of inspections by ensuring inspectors cover the right ground.

How to Use Questionnaire

Give the Questionnaire to the team leader and have that person distribute a copy to each team member responsible for inspecting an area of the facility. Once the inspection is over, the team leader should review the Questionnaire and sign it upon verifying that it's complete.

After inspections, you might want to hold interdepartmental meetings with facility managers to discuss the findings. This is especially true if the inspections unearth major or recurring safety problems. Give the department leaders copies of completed Questionnaires of inspections in their area and include notes and suggestions for corrections. Appoint somebody to be in charge of corrective actions and set a deadline. Once the deadline passes, do a follow-up inspection to verify corrections have indeed been made.

How to Create Questionnaire

Fire inspection team Questionnaires must be tailored to the configuration, operation and needs of your particular facility. But the essential approach is the same. Like our Model Questionnaire, your form should:

Provide Clear Instructions: The first part of the Questionnaire should explain what you want team members to do. At a minimum, ask them to conduct the inspection, fill out the form and return it to the team leader; then have the team leader review the form and give it to you.

List Inspection Detail: Leave space for the inspection date, team leader's name and signature, inspecting team member and area inspected.

Ask 10 Questions: Next comes the heart of the Questionnaire, the actual things you

want inspected. Like ours, your Questionnaire should ask questions about 10 things:

1. Whether all exit doors are clearly marked.
2. Whether all exits and exit routes are unobstructed.
3. Whether there are any doorways that workers might mistake for exits during a fire. Remember the OSHA General Requirements Standard requires you to mark any doorway or passageway that might be mistaken for an exit.
4. Whether workers know where in their work area portable fire extinguishers are located.
5. Whether workers in the area have been trained to use portable fire extinguishers.
6. Whether workers who are supposed to be trained to use portable fire extinguishers really know what they're supposed to be. Ask them to tell you in their own words what they would do when using the fire extinguisher.
7. Whether all fire extinguishers are where they're supposed to be. If a fire extinguisher has been removed or is missing, you'll need to immediately replace it or provide "alternate equivalent protection".
8. Whether all fire extinguishers appear to be in fully operable condition. Verify there are no signs of corrosion or mechanical damage.
9. The date of the last visual inspection listed on the tag of each portable fire extinguisher. Remember that OSHA requires that fire extinguishers be inspected at least once a month.
10. Whether there are any combustible materials, scraps or debris in the area.

Fire Inspection Team Questionnaire

Instructions: Each of the ABC Company fire inspection teams has been assigned a specific area of the facility to inspect. A team leader has also been designated to serve as the head of each team. That team leader will notify each member of the team of his or her duties including which area to inspect.

Each team member must complete this Questionnaire in conducting the inspection of the area to which he or she has been assigned. After completing the inspection, the team member will ensure that the Questionnaire has been thoroughly filled out and give it to his or her team leader. The team leader will review completed Questionnaires and sign them upon verifying their completeness and accuracy. The team leader will give all signed Questionnaires to the ABC Company Safety Director for evaluation and follow-up.