

Health and Safety Committees

Health and Safety Committee - Structure of Meetings

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Is the purpose of the health and safety committee clearly defined?

The roles and responsibilities of the health and safety 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 an active interest in health and safety and reduce incidents.
- Discuss and recommend effective actions to prevent workplace incidents.
- Promote awareness of health and safety issues and an atmosphere of cooperation between management and workers.
- Help in identifying issues, 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.

Please refer to the following OSH Answers documents for more information about health and safety committees:

- [Health and Safety Committee – What is a Health and Safety Committee](#)
- [Health and Safety Committee – Creation](#)
- [Health and Safety Committee – Effective and Efficient](#)
- [Health and Safety Committee – Measuring Effectiveness](#)

Is the committee's authority clearly defined?

The degree of the 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 those responsibilities must also be granted. A degree of responsibility is still necessary if the committee acts only in a consultative role. The provincial, territorial, 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 issues presented to them.

Should 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 legislation states that the committee must meet at least monthly, quarterly (every three months), or at least a specified number of times per year. Under certain circumstances, such as the initial stages of a newly formed committee or where urgent safety issues 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 workforce without representation, creates a 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 the week, to promote regular attendance and allow preparation time for committee members. Once the time and date are set, the meeting should not be postponed except for emergency reasons. Frequently postponed meetings will be seen as an indication of a lack of interest in safety, a lack of management commitment, and a lack of committee leadership.

What time of day are meetings held?

The timing of meetings may depend on many factors. 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 workers are most needed at their workstations should be avoided if possible. Whatever time is chosen, it should be the same for each meeting to promote attendance and 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- or whiteboards, 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. Late 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 be well-chaired so that all matters are covered adequately, but the meeting closes 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 cause 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).
 - Education or training session.
 - Time, date, and place of next meeting.
 - Adjournment.
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What is the procedure for the inclusion of new items of business on the agenda?

All members of the organization (management and workers) 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 may need to 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 there is a risk that the committee may spend too much time discussing priorities rather than on actual health and safety issues. The decision might best be left to the discretion of the co-chairpersons as long as both workers 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 the member represents, the study of health and safety issues 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 consideration. Disciplinary, human resources and personnel matters should be left to the appropriate managers, human resources, and union staff to handle while the committee devotes its attention to health and safety matters.

Workers are encouraged to resolve day-to-day safety concerns with their supervisor or manager. When such items reoccur on the committee agenda, it may be an indication that there are unclear terms of reference for the committee, workers are not aware of the reporting structure, or that the reports from workers are not being appropriately addressed. Committees should take concerns seriously when workers are not satisfied with the corrective actions or when no efforts appear to have been made to resolve an issue. Dealing with these instances can be challenging, and it is important that the committee take steps to not discourage workers from reporting health and safety concerns.

Committee members must be aware of actions taken to resolve cases of 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 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 their concerns or position and have these debated by all committee members. Compromise solutions in the form of more than one recommendation, setting priorities, or involving interim measures may help resolve a seemingly difficult situation. If a general agreement can be achieved, post-decision support from the entire committee and all workers 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, the item is more likely to be resolved in a timely manner. As with any complex issue, a useful way of ensuring the response is appropriate is to see if the following questions are answered: What happened? Why did it happen? How did it happen? Where did it happen? When did it happen? And who did it happen to? are answered. The issue should be stated in clear terms based on known facts.

The committee should [investigate](#) issues thoroughly and try to find their root causes. The recommended solution must be appropriate, meet all legislative requirements, and be the best possible practical method. The 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 issues 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 the meeting.
- Who attended.
- Items discussed (reports, issues, statistics, education).
- Reasons for recommendations (with all views being represented and recorded).
- Recommendations (specifying action by whom, by when).
- Time and date of next meeting.

The minutes should be brief and highlight all recommendations and decisions. A designated committee member needs to be assigned to record the minutes for each meeting (could be the same member or alternate each meeting). Notes should be taken during the meeting, using the agenda as a guide, and the minutes should be finalized immediately after while the proceedings are fresh in their 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. Co-chairs should confirm that the minutes accurately reflect what was discussed.

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 concerns 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 or minutes be forwarded to the employer, regulatory agency, or an 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 issues 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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