Safety Teams
Transforming Safety Committees to Improve Results

By R. Scott Lawson

Safety committees are one resource that OSH professionals can use to gain valuable assistance and expand program buy-in. Companies develop safety committees in many forms and variations. Some are contractually required, and some OSHA state plans require them including Alabama, Connecticut, Minnesota, Montana, North Carolina, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Nevada, Tennessee, Washington and West Virginia (Montana Department of Labor and Industry, 1993; OSHA, 2012). Such mandates do not necessarily lead to success, however.

So what makes a safety committee successful? A study by Smitha, Kirk, Oestenstad, et al. (2001), shows that safety committees have high significance ($p = .0014$) in reducing injuries in cases where required by regulation. If a company is going to support and put its resources into a safety committee, OSH professionals have the responsibility to provide value in that commitment to improving safety. Two components for success are reviewed here: 1) elements of a successful safety committee; and 2) providing leadership to the group.

Elements for Success
What's in a Name?

In the author's experience, the term *committees* does not inspire commitment nor does it impress on the members a sense of mutual purpose. As one colleague stated, "Committees don't do work." During one safety committee Kaizen event, attendees began the session by committing to a name change that expressed the group's true objective. After a few iterations, a new name was selected: Safety Solutions Team. The intent of this name was to inspire members to work as a team, identify problem areas and create solutions to improve safety.

IN BRIEF
•Safety committees can be an effective tool for change if properly managed and led.
•By incorporating several key elements into planning and organizing these teams, OSH professionals can help them produce better results.
•Leading safety teams goes beyond good planning and organizing. It encompasses providing direction and ensuring that all members are on-board and support the safety program's overall mission as well as the company's strategic plan.

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Management Tools

During that same event, participants discussed what would make a better committee. The previous committee of 19 members held long, unfocused meetings that often became an opportunity to complain, then dump issues on the safety manager to fix (a common pitfall of safety committees).

Furthermore, the committee was not managed well. Its leaders failed to use common committee management tools such as agendas, schedules and meeting minutes. Spath (1998) reports on a survey that revealed the following results about how safety committees use these tools:

• 91% had written minutes;
• 69% used a written agenda;
• 59% published a schedule of meetings;
• 26% established a formal budget;
• 16% held new member orientation.

Group Charter

During the Kaizen event, participants brainstormed elements to include in a charter that would direct the team's actions and orient future members to its goals. Although not a unique idea, the act of developing these elements as a team brought the group together. The elements were incorporated into a charter that was the primary Kaizen output to capture the group's work. These elements included:

1) scope;
2) vision;
3) objective;
4) mission;
5) team responsibilities;
6) membership;
7) member responsibilities;
8) membership orientation and debriefing;
9) removal from membership;
10) meetings;
11) quorum;
12) rules of order;
13) minutes;
14) ad hoc work groups and project teams;
15) outputs;
16) rewards and recognition;
17) best practices;
18) charter changes.

Many of these elements reportedly increase employer satisfaction with safety committees. According to Spath (1998), minutes, agendas, meeting schedules and member orientations are accom-

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plished by safety committees that have a 90% satisfaction rating by surveyed employers. Budget was the fifth tool leading to 100% satisfaction. In this case, the budget was incorporated into the safety budget and initially included snacks and meals, training, and rewards and recognition. Providing structure to the team enables members to fully understand the expectations up front and helps the team become more efficient and effective.

Subteams/Task Forces

Using subteams and task forces (Figure 1) that report to the full Safety Solutions Team expands the group's reach and provides more involvement opportunities. Subteams oversee ongoing activities, while task forces are generally used for short-term projects. Members of these groups need not be members of the Safety Solutions Team, but they will periodically report progress to the entire team for tracking and oversight. Subgroups can generate greater volunteer involvement because the commitment has a defined timeline.

For example, a machine guarding task force could be created and trained to review all machines for adequate guarding, develop a list of corrective actions and report progress to the team. Once the activity is complete, the task force would be recognized for its accomplishment, then it would disband.

Consider this brief example. At a large East Coast manufacturing location, the Safety Solutions Team formed a return-to-work subteam to examine high workers' compensation costs and 656 lost days in 2012 (Figure 2). Self-named the Transitional Work Team, the group was trained on return-to-work principles and developed a procedure outlining team member roles and responsibilities. The group evaluated internal policies and practices that hampered return to work and also evaluated the data for trends. Once barriers were identified and removed with support from management and frontline supervisors, the company's lost workdays decreased 88% to 79 days in 2013. The team continues to manage the process and as of August 2014, the site is experiencing another 45% reduction in lost workdays.

Leadership & Direction

Developing, organizing and structuring a team is only part of a successful initiative. Capturing essential management tools in the charter contributes to the level of satisfaction with the team by both management and team members (Spath, 1998). How the team is led and having a process for change improves the team's ability to increase a facility's safety and improve its safety culture. Following are five areas to consider when leading a team.

Leadership Category 1: Membership

Leadership is a beginning-to-end process. Ensuring a good start means selecting the right members at the beginning. When targeting team members, identify innovators and early adopters (Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, et al., 2008). Innovators are typically the first to latch on to new ideas. Patterson, et al. (2008), warn that it is best to avoid these indi-

viduals when forming the safety team, advising, "If they embrace your idea, it will surely die."

Early adopters, also referred to as opinion leaders, are typically well-respected, viewed as informed and trusted by their peers. According to Patterson, et al. (2008), 85% of peers will adopt an opinion leader's practice. In most companies, it is fairly evident who the opinion leaders are. If unsure or new to a company, an easy way to identify these employees is to ask a few people who they believe are well-respected and trusted in the company. Be purposeful in working with the opinion leaders. Earn their trust, spend significant time with them and be open to their ideas.

Another important consideration is how many members will be on the team. When determining team size, consider the operation's size and com-

Figure 1
Safety Solutions Team Example

Using subteams and task forces expands the group's reach and provides more involvement opportunities. Subteams oversee ongoing activities, while task forces are generally used for short-term projects.

Figure 2
Injury Severity Rate
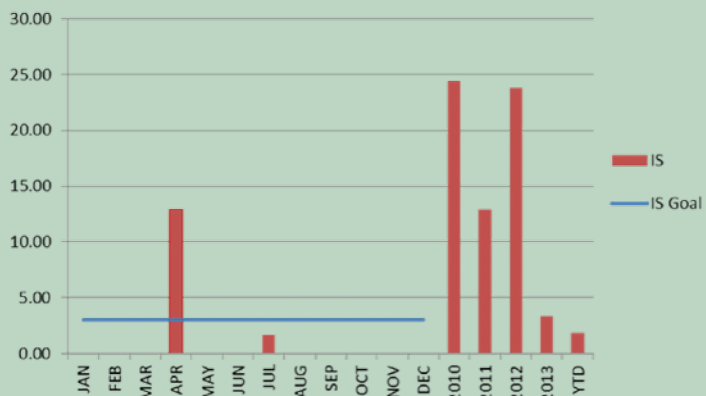
Note. *Manufacturing location lost workday rate through August 2014.*

Action	Impact	Value (benefit)	Drawback	Cost	Likelihood of success	Project duration	Supports what strategy

Note. Adapted from "Mapping the political terrain of allies and resistors [eCornell course ILRM510], by S. Bacharach, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, School of Industrial Relations.

Table 2
Stakeholder Analysis Worksheet

Stakeholder	Level of support	Ally, potential ally or resistor?	Stakeholder influence	Stakeholder benefit	Support approach
Immediate supervisor	Weak	Potential ally	Medium	High, increased visibility	Look at the numbers, people expect it of us
Division president	Passive	Ally	High	Medium, financial improvement	Look at the numbers, everybody is doing it
Staff member	Reluctant	Resistor	Low	High, increased responsibility and career development	They are making us do it
Function manager	Passive	Potential ally	Medium	Low, does not see any benefit	They are making us do it
Operations director	Active	Ally	High	Medium, increased visibility	People expect it of us

Table 1: Creating a log of the analysis helps the team allocate limited resources to the items most likely to have impact.

Table 2: The OSH manager must identify stakeholders early and assess their level of support for each activity, project and goal.

plexity. Spath (1998) reports that companies satisfied with their safety committee averaged 8.7 team members while unsatisfied companies averaged 9.2 members. Some groups have established regulatory guidelines for establishing the team size. For example, Oregon OSHA (2009) requires at least two members for companies with fewer than 20 employees and at least four members for companies with more than 20 employees.

It is best to include employees, managers and ad hoc members with specialized knowledge (e.g., medical, ergonomics, industrial hygiene). A team that is too large may be impractical and find it difficult to make decisions, while a team that is too small may not have the resources to accomplish desired goals. In the author's experience, the rule of thumb seems to be 7- to 9-member teams for larger, more hazardous operations, and 3- to 5-member teams for smaller, less hazardous operations.

Leadership Category 2: Political Environment & Culture

Understanding a company's political environment helps OSH professionals identify change opportunities that are likely to succeed. Time and boundaries are two key elements of understanding a company's political environment (Bacharach, ILRM510). Time involves the pace at which a company makes decisions and takes action. Boundaries focus on which markets the company sees itself operating in, now and in the future. Understanding both helps OSH professionals identify team goals, determine project timelines and empathize with the many demands of the leadership team.

Overall company culture (not just safety culture) is another consideration. Most definitions of culture encompass common attitudes, beliefs, values and perceptions. Culture can be evaluated based on a scale from atomistic to communal (Bacharach, ILRM510). A culture on the atomistic end is individualistic and a what's-in-it-for-me attitude prevails, while in a culture on the communal end people are more concerned with the group's well-being and seek a higher level of connection with the company.

Knowing where the company, department or person is on this scale aids in gaining support and identifying how to approach key stakeholders for support. For example, deploying an active caring campaign or behavior-based safety initiative in a highly atomistic company may be unsuccessful if the program does not properly address what the individual rewards will be for supporting the effort.

Leadership Category 3: Strategy & Tactics

Once the team is formed and oriented, team members must determine their strategy (long-range plans for success) and tactics (short-range steps) to achieve the strategy. This process cultivates a sense of mutual purpose. Tactics often become the team's goals, so team members should evaluate each goal to help determine their focus. The team can create a log of that analysis to allocate resources to those items most likely to have an impact and succeed (Table 1). To build momentum early, the team can identify items for quick wins and celebrate those achievements. The group must also periodically review the strategy and tactics and modify them as needed to remain relevant. In addition, the team must align its activities with the company's strategy and identify how each supports the company's overall strategy.

Leadership Category 4: Stakeholders

If the safety team is to succeed, the OSH professional must identify all stakeholders early on and assess their level of support for the Safety Solutions Team's activities, projects and goals. Support can be active, passive, reluctant or weak (Bacharach, ILRSM511). Other areas to assess are each stakeholder's level of influence within the company (high, medium, low; Table 2) and their personal benefit. Benefit can be high, medium or low but should also identify an individual benefit. OSH professionals can use this method to sell the strategy and tactics, while gaining higher levels of support and buy in.

Leadership Category 5: Gain Support

Bacharach identifies four arguments that OSH professionals can use to gain initial support.

Look at the Numbers

Looking at the numbers can be an effective ap-

proach if working with engineers, finance or other numbers-oriented groups. Many OSH professionals already use this technique by showing charts of injury frequency and severity, or detailing costs associated with workers' compensation and medical bills when proposing injury reduction initiatives. However, if loss history does not support action, as may be the case in mature or low-hazard facilities, management may not approve the initiative.

Everyone's Doing It

Most parents have heard the everyone's-doing-it argument many times. In the OSH case, however, it can be effective with a little research. Providing details of what peer or premier companies have done reduces the perceived risk of the action while also providing validity to a proposal. However, if a company considers itself to be the industry leader or operates in a fast-paced industry, use caution when citing another company's best practices as it suggests that efforts are already lagging.

They Are Making Us Do It

Sometimes, it is easy to point to a regulatory requirement that mandates corrective action. For example, implementing a confined space program is legally required (29 CFR 1910.146) and doing so also prevents serious injury and death. Some leaders respond to this argument, others do not. If the proposal details how to implement the change, a compliance-driven argument provides others the opportunity to express alternative ways to meet performance-based compliance initiatives. Thus, OSH professionals must be flexible and open to alternatives. This approach can also be effective for customer-driven requirements. For example, a company previously resistant to implement ISO 14001 does so successfully after a customer requires it.

People Expect It

On the other hand, if the company is an industry leader or has a reputation as having a premier safety culture, then explaining how an initiative meets expected standards of performance is an appropriate argument. Since this argument is not necessarily quantitative in nature, it is not likely an ideal approach when numbers and research are needed.

OSH professionals should identify more than one effective approach for each stakeholder. It is also best to view the stakeholder group as a whole to identify what argument resonates with the group.

Gaining support is as much about the message as it is about the messenger. An OSH professional's personal credibility in being able to accomplish a task and lead a team, as well as being able to illustrate a project's benefits to the company or individual, will influence how much initial support a safety team initiative will receive (Bacharach, ILRSM511).

Conclusion

Having an effective safety team requires sound planning, effective organizing and strong leader-

Pitfalls to Avoid When Creating a Safety Solutions Team

- Unclear or poorly defined safety team goals.
- Lack of a clearly stated mission for the safety team. This can include a) forgetting the team's mission; b) believing that the mission is cast in stone; and c) failing to communicate the mission.
- Unclear roles or responsibilities outlined for members.
- Too many members.
- Inattentiveness to employee feedback.
- Becoming overwhelmed by the number of problems.
- Getting sidetracked by complainers.
- Inadequate training and guidance for the team.
- Reacting to the problems rather than focusing on the system creating them.
- Failure to follow through on actions.
- Expectation of immediate results.
- Basing safety decision making solely on costs.
- Lack of a budget.
- Gathering data for judgmental rather than informational purposes.

ship. Getting the right people on the team from the start, and understanding and analyzing the support structure in place for initiatives leads to success. Success builds credibility and enhances support. In this way, OSH professionals can transform safety committees that meet periodically to safety teams that produce lasting results. **PS**

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