

## 2. Form a Health and Safety Committee

Effective efforts to make workplaces safe and healthy must involve workers and unions. An important tool is the employee health and safety committee, which keeps a day-to-day watch over working conditions. Committees can identify and resolve problems before they become serious or result in injuries or illnesses and investigate incidents or “near-misses” to learn how to prevent hazards.



The main job of health and safety committees is to spot and correct hazards that pose a threat to workers. A common “trap” in determining the root cause of hazards is to blame worker carelessness instead of uncontrolled hazards. An approach known as “behavior safety” mistakenly points the finger at worker performance and stresses ineffective fixes, such as personal protective equipment, which do not eliminate the hazard at its source. This “blame-the-worker” approach should be challenged by an employee safety committee, which should instead recommend eliminating the root causes of accidents and hazards.

Experience shows there are advantages to establishing employee-only committees that are independent of management. Yet many times there are both employee-only committees and joint labor-management committees in the same workplace. While a joint committee can provide a useful forum to work with management, an employee-only committee allows workers to prepare for joint committee meetings and more freely discuss problems and strategies for preventing hazards.

Committee members need not be experts in health and safety. Interest, concern, and a willingness to get involved are far more important. An understanding of technical and scientific information can be acquired over time. A committee should have members representing as many job titles, locations, and shifts as possible and should also be representative in terms of age, gender and race.

It may take a while to develop such a committee. Two or three active, involved people make a great start. Have meetings at a convenient time and place and keep them short and well-organized. There should be a clear, agreed-upon agenda, and minutes of decisions.

Good communication with fellow workers and with management is also vital to the success of a health and safety committee.

There are many activities committees can undertake. The list below provides examples.

### COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

- Review the employer's health and safety policies and programs.
- Check injury and illness records and logs maintained at the workplace for OSHA/NJPEOSH and workers' compensation purposes.
- Evaluate the employer's compliance with OSHA/NJPEOSH health and safety standards.
- Develop a hazard reporting form for employees.
- Conduct regular workplace inspections, investigate accidents and "near-misses" and respond to worker complaints.
- Conduct a survey of workers to document work-related health problems.
- Get a group together and ask them to draw a "floor plan" of the worksite on a large sheet of paper. On the floor plan, have them show where different hazards are located. Discuss how to analyze the "hazard map" and determine how hazards can be reduced or eliminated.
- Develop a list of all known or reported health and safety hazards to make sure there is management follow-up. This list should be available to workers and updated with the latest status of the hazards and controls.
- Inform people about the committee. Post minutes of meetings and names and phone numbers of contact people. Report on activities, especially successes.
- Educate committee members and other employees. Distribute health and safety information. Arrange for an educational program.
- Develop a health and safety library with information on hazards and protective measures.

As much as possible, committee meetings and other activities should take place during work hours. Committee members should receive their regular pay for all time spent on committee functions.

In joint labor-management committees, labor should have at least as many members as management, with workers and unions choosing their own members. Each side should pick a co-chair. The committee should meet regularly, at least once per month. Either party should be able to call an emergency meeting. Labor and management should make up the agenda together. The minutes should be approved by both parties, distributed to both management and employees, and include actions taken. There should be a neutral procedure for breaking tie votes.

### **HOW CAN WORKERS INVESTIGATE ACCIDENTS?**

The following questions should be asked during any accident/incident investigation:

- How did the incident really happen? This includes a step-by-step description of events leading up to it.
- How can the events be documented? Can photos be taken?
- Was the correct equipment available and accessible? Was it properly repaired and serviced?
- Was there adequate training and/or supervision of employees?
- Was the work assignment changed in ways that intensified pressure (speed-up, added work load or work duties, increased work pace, etc.)?
- Was the worker on a 12-hour shift or working large amounts of overtime that could lead to fatigue?
- Was there adequate staffing?
- Have all possible causes of the incident been identified and strategies developed for reducing each?
- Were there events in the past that should have signaled a problem?
- Was there a way to redesign the job to prevent the accident?
- What are the lessons learned from this investigation that would prevent this incident from happening again?
- Can these lessons be applied throughout the workplace?

## PUBLICATIONS WITH MORE INFORMATION



*Joint Labor-Management Health and Safety Committees*

[www.state.nj.us/health/eoh/peoshweb/jlmib.htm](http://www.state.nj.us/health/eoh/peoshweb/jlmib.htm)

*Guide to Effective Joint Labor/Management Safety and Health Committees*

[www.state.nj.us/health/eoh/peoshweb/jlmhsc.pdf](http://www.state.nj.us/health/eoh/peoshweb/jlmhsc.pdf)

**Phone:** 609-984-1863, NJPEOSH Program

*Joint Labor Management Health and Safety Committees, United Steelworkers of America, 2005*

[www.usw.org/usw/program/content/265.php](http://www.usw.org/usw/program/content/265.php)