

SAFETY COMMITTEES



a Guide to Their Establishment & Operation



Occupational Safety and Health Branch
Labour Department



OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY & HEALTH COUNCIL

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This guide is issued free of charge and can be obtained from offices of the Occupational Safety and Health Branch. Addresses and telephone numbers of the offices can be found in website of the Department at <http://www.labour.gov.hk/eng/tele/osl.htm>.

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A GUIDE TO THEIR ESTABLISHMENT
AND OPERATION**

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1. Introduction

The promotion of safety and health at work is not only a function of good management but it is, or ought to be, a normal management function. Safety and health objectives should be effectively incorporated into a company's overall management system along with other management objectives such as production and quality control.

If standards of safety and health at work are to be improved, full co-operation and commitment of all employees are absolutely essential. All employees must be able to participate fully in the making and monitoring of arrangements for safety and health at their place of work in order to arouse their interest in accepting their full share of responsibility. The appointment of safety committees is one of the methods of increasing the involvement and commitment of employees.

Given the diversity of operations and variability of workplace hazards, safety committees will need to be developed to take full account of all the relevant circumstances.

It is hoped that this guide will prove helpful to those who may wish to set up safety committees for the first time, or to restructure existing arrangements.

2. Objectives and functions

Safety Committees have the function of keeping under review the measures taken to ensure the safety and health at work of the employees. In carrying out this function safety committees ought to consider the drawing up of agreed objectives or terms of reference. An objective should be the promotion of co-operation between employers and employees in instigating, developing and carrying out measures to ensure the safety and health at work of the employees.

Within the agreed basic objectives certain specific functions are likely to become defined. These might include:

- (a) Monitoring the safety policy—whether it is adequate and how well it is being implemented;
- (b) The study of accident statistics and trends, so that reports can be made to management on unsafe and unhealthy conditions and practices, together with recommendations for corrective action;
- (c) Examination of safety audit reports on a similar basis;
- (d) Consideration of reports and factual information provided by Occupational Safety Officers;
- (e) Consideration of reports which committee members may wish to submit;

- (f) Assistance in the development of works safety rules and safe systems of work;
- (g) A watch on the effectiveness of the safety content of employee training;
- (h) A watch on the adequacy of safety and health communication and publicity in the workplace;
- (i) Organising safety promotional activities such as safety competitions, exhibitions, film shows, safety incentive schemes and safety suggestions;
- (j) The provision of a link with the Occupational Safety and Health Branch of the Labour Department.

In certain instances safety committees may consider it useful to carry out inspections by the committee itself. This will help the members to assess the effectiveness of the safe systems of work, and also the adequacy of the safety training which is being given to employees. But it is management's responsibility to take executive action and to have adequate arrangements for regular and effective checking of safety and health precautions and for ensuring that the declared safety policy is being fulfilled. The work of the Safety Committees should supplement these arrangements; it cannot be a substitute for them.

3. Composition

(a) Membership

The membership and structure of safety committees should be settled in consultation between management and the workforce. The aim should be to keep the total size as reasonably compact as possible and compatible with the adequate representation of the interests of management and all the employees. The number of management representatives should not exceed the number of employee's representatives.

The management membership of the committees should come from as many levels as practicable, with senior management well represented, and a careful mix of line and functional management. Management representation should be aimed at ensuring:

- (i) adequate authority to give proper consideration to views and recommendations;
- (ii) the necessary knowledge and expertise to provide accurate information to the committee on company policy, production needs and on technical matters in relation to premises, processes, plant, machinery and equipment.

Supervisors are key men in regard to safety as well as production, and their active co-operation are therefore essential. It is most important that the

supervisors are kept continuously in touch with the safety committees' work. The supervisory level should also be represented in the safety committees.

In companies where company doctors, occupational hygienists or safety officers/Advisers are employed, they should be ex-officio members of the safety committees. Other company specialists, such as project engineers, chemists, organisation and methods staff and training officers might be co-opted for particular meetings when subjects on which they have expertise are to be discussed.

It should be the practice for membership of safety committees to be regarded as part of an individual's normal work. As a consequence he or she should suffer no loss of pay through attendance at meetings of safety committees or at other agreed activities such as inspections undertaken by, or on behalf of, such committees.

(b) Chairman

The success of a safety committee is governed by the commitment and the support given to it by the management. This is best expressed by the appointment of a senior management representative as chairman. The director whose name appears on the safety policy document would be most appropriate.

The chairmanship must not be an empty-title—the chairman should regard it as one of his priority engagements to attend committee meetings, thus demonstrating management's real and practical interest in accident prevention. A deputy chairman should be appointed to take over when the chairman finds it impossible to attend a meeting.

(c) Secretary/Safety adviser

The position of the safety adviser in relation to the committee is a special one. His participation is extremely valuable by virtue of his expertise. At the same time his job demands impartiality, so his advice will be available equally to management and employees on the committee.

It will be to the greatest advantage to the committee to have the safety adviser as its permanent secretary. A second responsible person should act as minute-taker so that the safety adviser is free to participate in discussions and give advice and information where needed. The chairman should arrange for secretarial services for the committee.

It will be the safety adviser's duty as committee secretary to see that the committee's resolutions are put into effect or otherwise properly dealt with and the person instructed to take action makes a report at the next meeting. As secretary, he should always see that a detailed agenda is prepared. It will help

towards efficiency of the meetings if he makes time to go over the agenda with the chairman beforehand so that the latter has the background information on each item.

4. Size

It is impossible to lay down any hard and fast rules for the ratio of management and employee representatives. A balance must be held between the necessities of wide representation and of keeping the committee within reasonable limits of size.

If the work unit is very large, it may be found desirable to divide it into sections and to form a committee in each; adequate representation may otherwise be unobtainable without making the main committee too large. Where it is necessary to have a number of section committees, a co-ordinating committee should be formed with a senior manager as chairman, and each section committee represented by at least one member.

A safety committee should not be too large; about fifteen members is a desirable maximum. The larger the committee the more difficult it is to get full attendance, the less will be the participation from the more timid members, the longer will be the discussions and the fewer the decisions taken.

5. Length of service of membership

Usually there is only a limited number of management people for the committee, so the question of restricting their length of service does not arise. But there are advantages in periodically changing the employee membership of the committee because:

- (a) it allows the greatest possible number of employees to take an active part in the safety effort;
- (b) it provides the committee with a constant influx of different viewpoints and new ideas; and
- (c) it provides a challenge to existing members and prevents them, and the committee, from becoming stale and preoccupied with routine work.

The length of service will have to be suitable for the circumstances, but normally a two-year period of service is satisfactory. A shorter time may not allow the individual to make the best use of his capabilities on the committee's behalf. It takes time for people to settle down and gain confidence and begin to make constructive contributions.

When the system of retiring members at fixed intervals is used it is better for the committee if the retirement are staggered so that there is no sudden loss of

experienced members to disrupt long-term work. If one-third of the employee's members retire each year, continuity can be maintained and at the same time the committee has a continual influx of new members with possibly new approaches to problems.

6. Proceedings

(a) Style of meetings

The surest way to a safety committee gradually becoming ineffectual is for the meetings to be informal get-togethers with no fixed agenda but a worthy intention to discuss safety in general. Inevitably the discussions will be haphazard, time will be wasted on matters which are irrelevant or trivial, and meetings will rarely result in positive decisions.

Meetings must be planned beforehand, with the matters to be discussed listed on an agenda which is sent to all committee members so that they come to the meeting prepared to make their contribution.

A certain amount of formality is essential to uphold the authority of the chair, to keep discussions to the point, and to emphasise the importance of the meeting and the fact that decisions are to be made. Formality must not, however, go so far as to result in an atmosphere of constraint, and the creation of the right atmosphere depends very largely on the personality and the skill of the chairman.

When discussion starts the chairman, while keeping control, should let it develop informally to allow free and frank discussion. Many self-effacing people are overawed by formality and although they might have useful things to say they may not be able to summon the courage to speak up at meetings where the atmosphere is constrained.

(b) Accommodation

A tidy, comfortable room with a table of appropriate size for the number of members, is a good basis for a congenial business like meeting.

The chairman should keep a watchful eye on the seating and see that management and work people mix and do not form two separate blocs, which can only help to foster the "them and us" attitude which is so deplorable. The chairman should be quite firm about this right from the beginning, if necessary to the extent of having place names set on the table before anyone enters the room.

(c) Frequency of meetings

The frequency of meetings will depend on the work which the committee has to do, and this in turn depends on the circumstances of the individual establishment, the size of the workforce, the kind of work and the degree of risk inherent.

Monthly meetings are usually found satisfactory. If sub-committees are formed for particular tasks, it will normally be necessary for them to meet more often because their aim is to produce a specified result within a time limit.

Meetings should only be cancelled or postponed in very exceptional circumstances. Where postponement is absolutely unavoidable an agreed date for the next meeting should be made and announced as soon as possible. Members should send an apology if they are going to be absent, and the secretary should keep a record of the attendances.

The safety committee's programme should be arranged well in advance, and notices of the dates of meetings published where all employees can see them.

It may be necessary to draw up additional rules for the conduct of meetings, which could include set procedures by which the committee reaches decisions.

(d) The agenda

Not less than a week before the meeting of the safety committee each member should be sent a copy of the agenda, drawn up by the committee secretary.

If this person is not the safety adviser, then the safety adviser should be consulted on the formulation of the agenda.

It is important that the secretary goes through the agenda with the chairman before the meeting. The chairman has to know the background of each item and its relative importance so that he can discipline the discussions and see that priorities are given due consideration.

(e) The minutes

The proceedings must be recorded in minutes taken at the meeting because this forms the only authentic record. The most useful purpose of safety committee minutes is to provide a progress report on decisions made, recommendations put forward and action taken.

The minutes must identify against each item on the agenda the person who has been instructed to take action. When the minutes are sent out this serves as a reminder to the committee member concerned of his tasks, and a confirmation to all members that their decisions are being followed up.

Copies of minutes should of course be sent to each committee member; and also to the most senior executive responsible for safety and health. Arrangements should be made to ensure that the Board of Directors is kept informed about the safety committee's work.

As soon as possible after the meeting the minutes should be displayed on notice boards or other suitable places, or made available by other means, so that any interested employees can keep informed of the safety committee's activities.

7. An effective safety committee

An essential condition for the effective working of a safety committee is good communications between management and the committee and between the committee and the employees. In addition, there must be a genuine desire on the part of management to tap the knowledge and experience of its employees and an equally genuine desire on the part of the employees to improve the standards of safety and health at the workplace.

The effectiveness of a safety committee depends on the results it achieves, and this in turn depends on action being taken by management to implement the committee's recommendations. Whereas the committee itself is an advisory body, its management members have executive power to translate the committee's decisions into action.

The following activities could assist in maintaining the impetus of a committee's work:

- (a) regular meetings with effective publicity of the committee's discussions and recommendation;
- (b) speedy decisions by management on the committee's recommendations, where necessary promptly translated into action and effective publicity;
- (c) participation by members of the safety committee in periodical joint inspections;
- (d) development of ways of involving more employees.

8. Draft constitution

A formality to be undertaken in the early stages is to draft the committee's constitution. It should set out the main reason for the committee's existence, and such rules governing its membership, procedures and functions as will serve as permanent guidance throughout the changing membership.

The constitution of the committee will of necessity be different in the circumstances of each organisation. The following is for guidance only.

Constitution

1. The committee's duties are to assist in the promotion of safety and health at work of employees.
2. The committee shall consist of not more than . . . members, not more than . . . to be nominated by the management and not more than . . . to be elected by the employees in the departments they are to represent.
3. The managing director (or other appropriate person) shall be chairman of the committee. The safety adviser (or other appropriate person) shall be secretary.
4. The committee shall have power to co-opt additional temporary members for special purposes.
5. A quorum shall be . . . members.
6. Members of the committee shall hold office for two years.
7. Management representatives shall be eligible for re-appointment. Employee representatives shall not normally be eligible for re-election for two years after the date of retirement. One third of the employees' representatives shall retire every year.
8. Any vacancy occurring shall be filled by co-option from the department in whose representation the vacancy occurs.
9. The committee shall meet once a month, but may be summarily convened at any time as circumstances demand.
10. Time whilst engaged on the work of the committee shall be deemed to be working time and paid accordingly.
11. The company shall bear all costs incurred in the ordinary work of the committee subject to the approval of the managing director (or other appropriate person).
12. The committee shall cause proper minutes to be kept of all meetings. Copies of the minutes shall be posted on departmental notice boards and circulated to

Useful Information

If you wish to enquire about this guidebook or require advice on occupational safety and health, you can contact the Occupational Safety and Health Branch through:

Telephone	:	2559 2297 (auto-recording after office hours)
Fax	:	2915 1410
E-mail	:	enquiry@labour.gov.hk

Information on the services offered by the Labour Department and on major labour legislation can also be found by visiting our Home Page on the Internet. Address of our Home Page is <http://www.labour.gov.hk>.

Information on the services offered by the Occupational Safety and Health Council can be obtained through hotline 2739 9000.