

# Human Resources' Role in Selecting

## *An Effective Safety Committee*

As a statutory obligation many organisations have instituted or are in the process of instituting their safety and health committees. Not only is it important to meet the minimum standards as required by the Act but to have a strategic plan to guide the operations of the committee. Organizing or re-energizing a safety committee, whose sole purpose is to prevent injuries and accidents, can protect the organisation from avoidable costs that directly affect your bottom line.

A safety committee, as the heart of an organization's safety efforts, can:

- Make managers aware of production or operational safety issues.
- Help save time and money by improving everyday work activities.
- Reduce the risk of Prohibition notices or other penalties.
- Increase employees' safety awareness and knowledge.
- Enable employees to actively identify and address safety issues directly affecting them.
- Make workplace safety a more formalized and important commitment.
- Show upper management's genuine concern for employees' well-being.

I must note however, that without a clear safety policy and operational terms of reference, a safety committee is unable to reach its fullest potential in assisting the organisation. As part of the Plan, Do, Check and Act model of safety management, the safety policy provides the blue print for the organisation's path to a positive safety culture. From the policy the committee should be able to gather the statistical baseline; identify the priority areas; and decipher the improvement goals and standards. Once these are established, the committee will be able to plan and implement programmes to reach the predetermined objectives.

The legislation states that a health and safety committee must:

- meet at least once per quarter and keep records of what transpired at the meeting; and
- be granted access to information relating to all workplace hazards and to all reports relating to the work-place environment.

It is a recommendation of the Confederation that where an employer representative is the chairperson, the secretary should be an employee representative and vice versa.

The selection of the safety committee members is very integral to the committee's success. The members of the committee must be determined and competent to fulfil the tasks they are assigned. If the committee member is willing to function, without the requisite competence, the organisation can invest in the training the individual so they can competently perform their duties.

According to the Safety and Health at Work Act Sec 103, a committee must comprise of equal employer and employee representatives. The employer appoints management members of the committee and in a unionized workplace; the union selects the employee representatives. If the company is not unionized, the employees are to select their representative by way of nomination to Management.

While the legislation is clear on the construction of the safety committee and its duties there are a few areas that still cause some concern to employees and employers.

### **Can a supervisor be selected as an employee representative?**

The question is one that is relative to the size of the organisation. With a committee whose constitution was based on equality, to have a supervisor with a heavy management focus as an employee representative can lead to the other employees representatives assuming a attitude and position of weakness. However, this must be balanced with the choice of the employees. If the employees are comfortable with a supervisor representing them, and they themselves selected him/her themselves, then he must be objectively considered for the position. It is the recommendation of the BEC that supervisors who represent employees be line supervisors, those who actually work with and among the employees, and as such he/she understands and can relate to the concerns of the employees. At no point should the committee appear to be management dominant.

### **Can management delegate their representation to employees?**

Generally, management should not delegate their responsibility to the committee to an employee as their major function is the relay management's perspective of certain policies and weigh in on the effectiveness of the committee's recommendations. Because management level staff have greater knowledge on organisational budgets and strategic plans, they can actually assist the committee with setting SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time bound) focussing heavily on attainable and time bound. However, due to restrictions, if a manager delegates their

representation to an employee who has taken a leadership role within the organisation; there must be a clear understanding between the employee and the manager on role of the employee. The committee members should understand that the true purpose of the committee is to open dialogue between employees and management on safety matters.

### **Can a safety committee discipline employees due to their infraction of the safety policy?**

To answer the question one must go to the root of the question, what is the real function of the committee. A safety committee's major functions are to identify hazards, safeguard safety and health and make recommendations on actions to management. Employees who demonstrate unsafe behaviours are hazards and as such should be identified to the relevant management personnel – Human Resources department, who will then take action based on their disciplinary procedure. In essence the committee members are only stewards of the workplace health and safety programme.

If an organisation wishes to thrive they must understand the importance of occupational health and safety. It is only through the selection of an effective and efficient committee, the goals of the safety policy can be met which leads to pure and positive safety and health culture.