

Safety Committees in California:

*An effective tool for IIPP compliance,
employee communication, and
building a safety culture*



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Introduction

Employers today have plenty of options when it comes to achieving regulatory compliance, fostering a healthy relationship between management and employees, and bolstering a strong safety culture. One common approach is to form a labor/management safety and health committee (LMSHC).

If you're going to implement such a committee, though, it's important to know exactly what you hope to accomplish and how you intend to set about getting it done.

This guide will help you understand how an LMSHC can benefit your organization, how to build one from scratch and set appropriate goals, and the specific ways the committee can help you meet those goals.

The advantages of LMSHCs

Another committee? Who asked for that? And this committee is going to pull workers away from production to talk about safety? That's a double whammy as far as expense is concerned, right? You lose the workers' productive time and give it away to the expense of a safety program.

If that's management's opinion of the value of LMSHCs and safety programs in general, it's time to start calculating the positive impact of an effective safety program, reinforced by the work of an LMSHC, on the company's bottom line. Important business concerns—including productivity, profit, and protection from lawsuits—support making safety and health management a high priority.

Here's what a well-designed safety and health program can do for your workplace:

- ◆ ***Reduce the direct cost of injuries.*** Safety and health programs protect employees from physical injury and other health hazards. They can help:
 - Prevent injuries and deaths.
 - Reduce back injuries and body strains.
 - Prevent occupational health conditions such as dermatitis.
 - Improve the overall health of employees.
- ◆ ***Increase productivity.*** The sorts of things that enhance safety—preventive maintenance to keep machines running safely, ergonomic improvements that cut the risk of injury from performing a task, good lighting to reduce slips and falls, walkways kept free of accumulated clutter for fire safety—tend to increase productivity, too. A well-maintained machine breaks down less often. An ergonomically well-designed task can be performed more efficiently. Good lighting increases focus and reduces eye strain. Clean walkways make finding items and walking through the workplace faster and easier.

- ◆ **Reduce down time.** Accidents, injuries, and even near misses interfere with efficient production. Production lines shut down, carefully trained employees are laid up, and expenses from lost work time and damaged product and equipment mount. An effective safety program minimizes these unpredictable, uncontrollable costs.
- ◆ **Reduce workers' compensation costs.** Workers' compensation insurance is a significant cost driver for many employers, especially in high-risk workplaces. A strong safety program reduces accidents, resulting in fewer claims, less serious claims, lower experience modification rates, and lower overall costs.
- ◆ **Reduce employee turnover.** Attention to safety helps improve employee morale by making employees confident that they are working in a safe environment. And a workforce with higher morale has lower turnover and lower associated costs.
- ◆ **Improve the employer's reputation.** When a worker dies, and sometimes when a worker is injured, the company's image takes a hit—and that can translate to a drop in business. Complaints and lawsuits resulting from such incidents can have a long-term effect on the employer's reputation.

All of these benefits can be converted to trackable metrics. Tracking safety-related metrics is just one of the many things that your safety and health committee can do that will help you better target your workplace interventions, improve your injury and illness prevention program (IIPP) compliance, facilitate communication, and build a strong safety culture.

Developing an LMSHC

A successful LMSHC requires substantive participation from both labor and management. Generally, management must provide the initial driving force behind the committee, as it controls personnel, scheduling, and budget. Management's demonstration of genuine commitment should help create an environment of mutual trust and cooperation that draws labor into the enterprise.

Management commitment

Management demonstrates its commitment to the safety committee by:

- ◆ **Providing resources.** Without resources, the committee cannot function effectively. Management must provide financial support



(for equipment, incentive programs, etc.), time (for meetings, reports, and inspections), and other resources, such as space and materials.

- ◆ ***Being open to the committee's suggestions.*** Management needs to assume that it will have to adopt some of the committee's recommendations. No committee will be taken seriously if its suggestions are ignored.
- ◆ ***Setting goals.*** Both sides should participate in goal-setting. Be sure to set challenging yet attainable goals for the safety program.
- ◆ ***Providing support for the safety program.*** The LMSHC is part of the overall safety program. Without support for the overall safety program, the committee is likely to be ineffective.
- ◆ ***Obeying safety rules.*** Management should never give the impression that safety rules don't apply to it. For one thing, it's not safe! For another, workers will take that to mean that the safety rules are not really all that important. Management, including supervisors, should always wear the safety gear required in the plant and observe rules about restricted areas and safe work practices.
- ◆ ***Including safety and health in management meetings.*** Safety won't be perceived as coming from the top down with any sincerity if the topic never comes up in higher-level meetings.
- ◆ ***Rewarding based on safety.*** Safety performance should be a criterion in performance evaluations and bonuses for managers.
- ◆ ***Providing consistent enforcement.*** When employees don't abide by safety rules, swift and sure discipline must follow. Don't let bad or dangerous habits get started, and don't put yourself in the position of hearing an employee say, "But you never said it wasn't safe."
- ◆ ***Holding managers accountable.*** Line managers should be held accountable for the safety of their units. Never let safety be thought of as simply the committee's responsibility.
- ◆ ***Making everyone responsible.*** Safety should be everyone's job. Although you may appoint a single person as safety manager, give line management safety-related duties, or appoint a safety committee, be sure to always stress that each employee is also responsible for safety.

Employee participation

Once management has pledged its support to the committee, it's time to bring in workers. You don't want your committee to be management-heavy, which can leave it disconnected from workers and reduce its effectiveness as a communication tool. Safety committees seem to have the greatest success with bodies made up equally of employees and management representatives.

The smartest approach is to use the workers' own hierarchy as a way to reach out to them. Go to your:

- ◆ **Supervisors**, who are the connecting point between production employees and upper management. Supervisors are the people who will have to release workers for safety duties and give up time for inspections, maintenance, and cleanup. They also play a key role in striking a balance between productivity and safety.
- ◆ **Union stewards**, who can make it difficult to put your program into effect—even if they basically support it—if they have not been in on the planning. Communicate clearly with your union from the beginning.

Encourage those groups to cast a wide net when recruiting for your committee. If your committee leaves out departments with a substantial interest in safety, you could miss opportunities to identify and correct significant hazards. Try to draw expertise from all shifts and from different departments, including:

- ◆ **Safety and health.** It might seem like a no-brainer, but be sure to include someone from your safety and health department on the committee. The committee itself might feel as if it lacks ownership of its work if it's required to deal with the safety and health department as a separate entity.
- ◆ **Production.** Production workers from all major departments should be included. Production workers are closest to the action and can provide valuable insights on where the risks are and what could be improved.
- ◆ **Maintenance.** Maintenance is critical to safety in most workplaces. Whether it's the safety of a process that contains hazardous chemicals, the safety of equipment used by workers, or the safety of machinery with many moving parts, the input of your maintenance department is invaluable.
- ◆ **Human resources.** Your human resources department can provide tremendous assistance in several areas. It can lend expertise in training, regulatory compliance, and employee discipline; identify potential red flags for safety issues like substance abuse or violence; and ensure that your workers' compensation, health insurance, and employee assistance programs are all performing well.



- ◆ **Quality assurance.** Safety and health have considerable overlap with quality control concerns. Your quality assurance personnel may be the first to identify production problems that have a safety component. For example, product with too much moisture in it may indicate an adulterated process; product that is outside tolerances might result from understaffing or poorly maintained process equipment. Both of these can also be safety issues.

Practical considerations

In addition to the commitment and recruitment issues above, you'll need to address some practical matters.

Committee size. The size of the committee will depend on the size of your workforce.

For a workforce of fewer than 200 employees, experts generally recommend a committee of 6 to 10 members. For 200–1,000 employees, they advise a committee of 6 to 12 members. Committees of this size will generally be large enough to allow for particular duties to be designated to individual members but not so large that it becomes difficult to conduct meetings and coordinate members' activities.

At businesses with more than 1,000 employees and/or various shifts and locations, consider having multiple committees.

Alternate members. Not everyone will be available all the time, but it's important to ensure that each department and shift is represented and kept up to date on the committee's work. Designate alternates to serve when regular members are unavailable. Regular committee members should brief their alternates on committee activities.

Alternates can also serve another purpose: They can be your on-deck replacements for committee members who have served their terms, providing a measure of experience and continuity for your team.

Length of term. Committee members should serve long enough to develop some expertise but not so long that they burn out. You also should decide whether committee members will serve concurrent terms or rotating terms with staggered starting and ending dates of service. Rotating terms allow more employees to serve on the committee and expose more employees to safety and health education. But they can also result in a lack of continuity, which could mean fewer resolutions of safety and health problems.

Chair selection. The committee should decide who serves as chair and whether this position should be rotated (if this isn't already prescribed in collective bargaining agreements).

Subcommittees. Major tasks may require the appointment of a subcommittee. For example, you could establish a subcommittee tasked specifically with employee education and training or with dealing with special circumstances, such as the introduction of new equipment.

Members chosen to serve on subcommittees should have interest and experience in the panel's work. These subcommittees should report back to the main committee, enabling it to carry on its primary tasks. For short tasks, such as addressing hazards of new equipment, the subcommittee should be temporary.

As an alternative to subcommittees, you could permanently assign committee members responsibilities to meet the committee goals. For example, selected individuals would always handle housekeeping issues, while others would address only accident investigations.

Changes to the committee structure. The committee should have enough flexibility to alter its structure under certain circumstances, such as a new collective bargaining agreement, new management or employee representatives, a change in work operations, or a change in the committee's work functions. Changes in structure could affect the committee's size, composition, mission, or organizational structure.

Employee factors. You must account for some additional, employee-specific factors when you are selecting committee members. Make sure you consider whether each prospective member:

- ◆ Has enough time available;
- ◆ Has an interest in safety issues;
- ◆ Is respected by fellow employees; *and*
- ◆ Has the ability to conduct an unbiased inspection or investigation.

Make sure that workers understand why they were included on the team and what you hope they will bring to the table. Relate their expertise to the goals of the committee.

Implementing an LMSHC

Once you have pulled your committee together, what should it do? A safety and health committee can accomplish a lot—but it'll accomplish more if the members know what they are commissioned to do and the authority they possess to get it done. Look at your organization's priorities, and decide exactly where your safety committee should focus its efforts.

Empowering your committee

The committee's overall purpose is to improve safety and health at the facility, but how is it empowered to accomplish this?

- ◆ Does the committee have an advisory or a decision-making function?
- ◆ If it makes decisions, does the committee take action, or does it report to someone who implements its decisions?
- ◆ Does the committee respond to hazards, complaints, accidents, or other situations as they arise, and/or does it take a preventive approach, such as getting involved in long-range planning for the purchase of plant and equipment materials, renovations, and employee training?

In addition, consider whether you wish to authorize your committee to:

1. Access the entire facility for inspections and investigations of accidents and complaints.
2. Review and comment on plans to purchase new equipment.
3. Review and comment on management or union ideas to correct workplace hazards.
4. Access agency records on planning, finance, and new technology.
5. Control its own budget.
6. Hire consultants.
7. Control or influence employee safety and health training.
8. Shut down unsafe equipment or evacuate unsafe or unhealthful areas.
9. Choose or recommend control devices, such as ventilation systems, personal protective equipment (PPE), and barriers and guardrails.

The powers necessary for a committee to carry out its mission will vary among workplaces and should be clearly defined, but every LMSHC must have enough power and authority to allow it to carry out its mission. Committee members also should be given paid time for meetings and all other committee duties.

Setting goals

Working within the range of its authority, the safety committee should generate specific goals that it hopes to achieve. Goals can be broken down into categories like the following:

- ◆ Safety statistics
 - Goal: Fewer lost workdays
 - Goal: Fewer accidents or near misses

- ◆ Safety costs
 - Goal: Reduced workers' compensation payments
 - Goal: Reduced healthcare costs
 - Goal: Increased productivity
- ◆ Safety activities
 - Goal: Complete a safety project (for example, revise the safety data sheet (SDS) book).
 - Goal: Complete training program.
 - Goal: Inspect each work area.
 - Goal: Review emergency plans.

Goals should be measurable and time-limited. Break complex goals down into smaller sets of goals, and establish milestones for completing individual segments. For example, one goal might be to reduce lost workday incidents by 10 percent for the year. To accomplish this, the committee could lay out several steps and when it expects to accomplish them. It could then schedule training and create an incentive program tied to the goal.

Assigning tasks

Once the committee has set its goals, it can designate and assign the tasks necessary to complete them. Its tasks could include:

- ◆ **Safety planning.** Devise a comprehensive plan for accomplishing the safety program's goals.
- ◆ **Safety policies and handbooks.** Develop and keep current your organization's safety policies and procedures handbooks.
- ◆ **Safety management, evaluation, and review.** Review the safety program in general, ensure that it is carried out, and review inspection and investigation reports to confirm that appropriate action is taken.



- ◆ *Safety communication.* Communicate from the committee up to management, out to the employees, and in from the employees to the committee.
- ◆ *Safety training.* Ensure that every employee knows how to safely do his or her job.
- ◆ *Safety meetings.* Encourage these meetings, provide materials and suggestions, and perhaps even schedule and present.
- ◆ *Hazard identification, safety auditing, and inspection.* The first major step in preventing accidents is to identify the hazards.
- ◆ *Hazard control.* Controlling hazards is the next key step. This involves investigating accidents, reviewing all reports of hazardous conditions, developing plans for controlling the hazards, and preventing problems.
- ◆ *Safety motivation and incentive programs.* Most safety programmers have found that positive incentives are important and not necessarily expensive.
- ◆ *Safety conscience.* The committee often serves as the safety watchdog for the organization, making sure that plans and programs are carried through, accidents are investigated, and complaints and suggestions are addressed.

Your committee as an IIPP compliance tool

Meeting Cal/OSHA's requirements for LMSHCs

California employers aren't required to use LMSHCs, but the state's IIPP standard, in General Industry Safety Orders Section 3203, defines basic requirements for LMSHCs that apply to companies that choose to establish them.

The first step in using your safety and health committee to strengthen your IIPP is to ensure that it meets the requirements set for it by the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Cal/OSHA). Under the IIPP standard, the committee must:

- ◆ Meet at least quarterly.
- ◆ Prepare and make available notes of the safety and health issues discussed at committee meetings.
- ◆ Review the results of periodic, scheduled worksite inspections.
- ◆ Review investigations of occupational accidents and causes of incidents resulting in occupational injury, occupational illness, or exposure to hazardous substances.
- ◆ Submit suggestions to management for the prevention of future incidents.
- ◆ Review investigations of alleged hazardous conditions brought to the attention of any committee member.

- ◆ Conduct its own investigation of alleged hazardous conditions at its discretion, and assist in finding solutions.
- ◆ Submit recommendations to assist in the evaluation of employee safety suggestions.
- ◆ Verify abatement actions taken by the employer if so requested by Cal/OSHA.

Assessing the IIPP

One thing that your safety and health committee can do to improve your IIPP compliance is to assist with the annual review of the program. Your IIPP should be reviewed once a year to identify areas that are working well and those that might need improvement. Your safety and health committee is well-suited for this task.

The committee could review whether:

- ◆ Any recordable injuries or illnesses have occurred in the past year.
- ◆ Any safety-related activities or improvements that you planned or initiated were completed.
- ◆ All employees completed required training throughout the year.
- ◆ Significant numbers of workers were disciplined for safety infractions, and whether the infractions were serious.
- ◆ Attendance at safety meetings was poor.
- ◆ Workers have a generally negative attitude toward the safety program.

The answers to these questions can be used to help set goals for the committee and the program in the coming year.

Fulfilling Cal/OSHA expectations

A number of requirements that apply to the IIPP can be directly addressed by your LMSHC. Specifically, when Cal/OSHA looks at your IIPP, it wants evidence of management's safety commitment in the form of strong organizational policies, procedures, incentives, and disciplinary actions designed to ensure employee compliance with safe and healthy work practices.

Cal/OSHA wants to see that your IIPP includes:

- ◆ ***Goals.*** Cal/OSHA expects employers to establish objectives for accident and illness prevention, just as they would for other business functions like sales or production. The goals you set for your safety and health committee provide evidence that you are doing so.
- ◆ ***Accountability.*** Supervisors and employees should be aware of their safety and health responsibilities and know that they will be held accountable. In many workplaces, the members of the safety and health committee are

responsible for training, inspections, accident investigations, and other activities that inform workers and management of their responsibilities and hold them accountable for their actions.

- ◆ **Reporting of unsafe conditions.** Employees should be encouraged to report unsafe conditions and feel confident that management will take appropriate action if they do so. When you have an LMSHC in place, it often receives such reports, responds to them, and facilitates productive relations between labor and management with respect to addressing those conditions.
- ◆ **Resources.** Your IIPP should specify how you will allocate company resources—financial, material, and personnel—to accomplish your IIPP goals. It should specifically cover resource allocation for:
 - The identification and control of hazards in new and existing operations and processes, as well as the identification of potential hazards;
 - The installation of engineering controls;
 - The purchase of PPE;
 - The promotion of safety and health; *and*
 - Employee training in safety and health.

If your safety and health committee is responsible for or actively participates in any or all of these, you'll be able to show just how your resources are being put to work.

- ◆ **Leadership.** The expectations you set for employees should also apply to management, as appropriate. For example, plant supervisors and field superintendents should be required to wear appropriate PPE when entering hazardous work areas, follow safe work practices, and not place themselves in harm's way.

Your committee as a communication tool

The best written plan in the world won't have any effect at all on workplace safety if no one knows what's in it. That's why Cal/OSHA's IIPP standard requires your IIPP to include a system for communicating with employees on matters relating to occupational safety and health. LMSHCs are listed in the IIPP standard as one method employers can use to comply with this requirement.

Whatever means you use, be sure that it:

- ◆ **Is "readily understandable by all affected employees," as required by Cal/OSHA.** This may mean providing safety information in multiple languages.
- ◆ **Encourages, rather than discourages, employee reporting of hazards.** Workers must know they won't be penalized for reporting workplace hazards. Make sure that all supervisors know how to handle reports of problems appropriately—to take workers seriously, address complaints

immediately if possible, and not react with exasperation, anger, or dismissiveness to workers' hazard reports.

Your LMSHC can ensure that labor and management are able to discuss on a regular basis any accidents, injuries, or near misses at your site or at similar sites that have a bearing on the day's work, as well as any employee safety concerns and feedback. The committee also can select and schedule regular opportunities for safety communication between management and all workers, including:

Live training programs. It can be tempting to put as much training as possible online, but if you do so, you risk missing a chance to interact with workers, find out what they do or don't really understand, and answer their questions. Live training programs make excellent vehicles for communicating with employees.

Live training programs don't have to cost much. For example, the committee could bring in a manufacturer's representative to go over safe work practices for a new piece of equipment, or a representative from your workers' compensation carrier could go over an emerging safety issue in your industry.

Suggestion boxes. Workers need to be able to communicate their safety concerns to management. Sometimes, they are more comfortable doing so anonymously. A safety suggestion box can provide workers with a discreet way to contribute their insights.

However, it can also make it more difficult to ensure that workers know their concerns are being addressed. If workers know that their suggestions are being reviewed by the LMSHC, you may hear fewer complaints that "nobody reads those anyway."

Printed materials. For some employees, printed materials can be a useful and effective way of always keeping safety in the forefront of workers' minds. Bulletins, newsletters, paycheck stuffers, fact sheets, and quick-reference pocket cards from federal OSHA and Cal/OSHA can all reinforce the safety message.

Your safety and health committee can provide valuable input into the types of materials that would be best received and which languages and reading level the workers in their various departments need.

Your committee as a building block of safety culture

Many of the benefits of an effective safety and health program—increased productivity, more consistent product quality, and reduced accident rates and turnover—can be achieved using multiple strategies. These strategies reinforce and strengthen one another.

A well-organized and effective LMSHC is one strategy that can help achieve these ends; a strong safety culture is another. Even if you have a strong safety culture, your safety and health committee can be another tool in your toolbox that supports and enhances safety culture.

Your “workplace culture” is the set of norms and assumptions that underlie your day-to-day operations. In other words, it’s what your workers believe you *really* want. In many workplaces, workers believe that production is what the employer really cares about—so they will cut safety corners rather than compromise production. Workers may be convinced that productivity will be rewarded, while reduced productivity will be penalized.

Workers won’t automatically make the connection between safer work practices and increased productivity on their own. This can be a major obstacle to the implementation of safe work practices within the work environment.

Your safety and health committee can help change that perception. Workers’ fundamental beliefs about the nature and goals of the organization will have to change for them to see the connection between safety and corporate goals and to begin to really believe in management’s commitment.

Your safety committee can demonstrate to skeptical workers—or reinforce to engaged workers—that:

- ◆ ***Management is committed to action that improves safety.*** If your safety committee is involved in the planning stages of new projects, workers will see the relative importance of those groups within the organization. Concrete actions that arise out of your safety committee—like the prompt repair and replacement of unsafe equipment, the ready availability of safety gear, and adequate staffing that enables workers to do their jobs without rushing and cutting corners—also reinforce the idea that management takes safety seriously.
- ◆ ***Workers are an important part of the safety program.*** Workers know their jobs and their equipment better than the plant manager does. If they’re invited to participate in the process of designing, selecting, and implementing safety improvements as part of the safety committee, they’re more likely to believe that management is committed to actually improving safety. If they are not invited to participate, they may react defensively to changes imposed from the top down, without consideration of their concerns or solicitation of their input.



- ◆ **Written safety guidelines and policies matter.** A worker who is told to consult and follow lockout/tagout procedures for a specific machine won't believe he's actually supposed to do so if machine-specific procedures aren't readily available to him. When safe work procedures are readily available, workers lack a built-in excuse for cutting corners. Your safety committee can make sure that written procedures are available, complete, and up to date so they will actually be valuable to workers trying to stay safe.

In addition, committee members can set an example. Employees will look at how their coworkers behave for clues regarding the employer's values and culture. If workers see the members of the safety committee following safe work practices, wearing their PPE, and setting a good example, they're more likely to buy in to the program.

A strong safety culture is one in which workers feel comfortable committing to safety because they know that it is something management truly values. Your safety and health committee can go a long way toward reinforcing that feeling.

Mistakes that undermine your committee

There's a lot that you can do right to help ensure the success of your committee. Unfortunately, you can also make missteps that will undermine it.

Don't make these mistakes:

- ◆ **Unclear roles.** This applies not just to the committee as a whole but also to individual members. Make sure everyone knows what they're supposed to be doing.
- ◆ **No budget.** A lack of funding indicates a lack of commitment. It sends the wrong message.
- ◆ **Failure to orient new members.** New members may be unaware of group dynamics and past issues. Bring them up to speed by providing minutes and other documents. If possible, let departing members orient the newcomers.
- ◆ **Lack of follow-up.** Committees can rise and fall on their reputation for doing what they say they will do. Committee leaders should request formal status reports and review assignments at the end of each meeting to keep everyone on the same page. Many committee agendas list both the topics to be discussed and the person responsible for seeing each issue through.
- ◆ **Lackluster participation.** The experts say the best members are active, involved participants who eagerly share their passion for safety with their coworkers. Leaders should find ways to get all members involved and fully representing their department or work group.

Evaluating your committee

If you are careful to ensure that management is committed, labor is participating, and the committee is actually doing good work, your committee should be successful. But you can't be certain that's the case without regularly evaluating the committee.

While checking a hazard off an action list is satisfying, it's not an effective way to assess committee success. Consider these ways to gauge the effectiveness of the meetings and the committee overall:

- ◆ Ask members to complete a confidential, anonymous survey with questions developed by the full committee or a subcommittee.
- ◆ Hold focus groups or develop surveys for employees not on the committee.
- ◆ Prepare a committee annual report that can be benchmarked against goals.
- ◆ Develop a checklist of committee best practices and anticipated achievements to chart how your committee measures up. Individual members can complete the grid on their own and then discuss their responses as a committee.
- ◆ If your company is part of an industry association or has multiple divisions, invite representatives from other safety committees to conduct an audit of your committee.
- ◆ If you buy or receive safety services from your insurance carrier, ask it to conduct a committee review.