

Health and Safety in the Lab: More important now than ever before

Jane Northup Ph.D.
RI State Crime Laboratory
JNorthup@uri.edu

Health and safety in forensic labs has been a policy topic staple for many years. Whether it is managing the environmental factors in the lab, keeping analysts safe while they process evidence, preparing risk assessments for health and safety, and having proper PPE available for your staff, you probably have a policy discussing each of these situations and many more. However, with the added burden of COVID-19 protocols, are we continuing to effectively manage our health and safety programs? Keeping safety committees engaged has been an issue all along, but with COVID protocols in place, is COVID fatigue effecting general lab health and safety?

Safety committees bring together workers and employers through regularly scheduled meetings where safety issues are addressed. The goal of a safety committee is to create and nurture a culture of safety. However, the need for safety committee's to maintain their effectiveness, keeping all of your employees engaged in health and safety policies, and motivating safety committee's to continue their important work is, at times, difficult.

Maintaining the Committee's Effectiveness

To have an impact, safety committees should hold regular meetings and follow a consistent schedule. There should be a set clear meeting agenda, which is published in advance, and followed. Meeting minutes must summarize the issues discussed, the proposed actions and the people responsible for following up on each item. Minutes should also be published and provided to each committee member, as well as made available to all employees.

- If possible, require members to attend all meetings.
- Publicize the committee's accomplishments.
- Set both short-term (one to six months) and long-term goals. These should be measurable, achievable and reviewed periodically to determine the group's effectiveness.
- Improve cooperative inspections by including workers and management representatives.
- Address legitimate safety issues only. The committee should not be a general gripe forum.
- Be positive.

Additionally, to launch a successful safety committee, it is essential to publicize the committee's formation and offer an introductory training meeting for all employees and communicate the roles and responsibilities of "their" safety committee.

Employee Involvement

There are several ways to keep your staff actively engaged in safety concerns.

- Include a higher percentage of employees on committees. Research has shown that organizations with a higher percentage of its workforce on safety committees have lower injury and illness rates.
- Directors should sit in on safety committee meeting on a regular basis, if not on all meetings. Safety committees with strong and visible upper management support are more likely to make a meaningful impact on workplace safety.
- The safety committee lead must be a good communicator. An effective safety committee leader is someone who can facilitate.
- Facilitate a meeting without dominating it or allowing others to, and encourages participation among all members.

Motivating the Safety Committee

As a committee member, there is nothing worse than sitting on committees where little is accomplished. To keep your committee members motivated:

- Make your committee's immediate and long-term goals reasonable, especially as the group is gaining its footing. Make sure you have goals that are reasonable and can be accomplished within a short term, in addition to long term goals for the future.
- Well-run committees can be especially effective when members digest numerous perspectives, both from inside the organization and other industries. Safety and health is required in most organizations, look to other industries to think outside of the box.
- Committees should be mindful of following a respectful, business-like etiquette during meetings, even as efforts are made to add novelty and interactivity.
- Designate one member to ensure each person is being treated with respect and that proceedings remain on course.

Resources:

<https://www.cdc.gov/faca/committees/bscniosh.html>

Fivizzani, K. P. (2019). Industrial lab safety committees and teams-Case study, *Journal of Chemical Health & Safety*, 26(6), 71-74.

Deppa, S. W. (2011, September). Participation on Voluntary Committees for Standards and Codes by Forensic Practitioners-A Win-Win Combination. In *Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting* (Vol. 55, No. 1, pp. 608-612). Sage CA: Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

<https://www.safetyandhealthmagazine.com/articles/10413-effective-safety-committees>