

## Safety Meeting Burnout?

### *Here Are Some New Ideas to Rekindle the Flame*

They're required, but relentless. Beneficial but (sometimes) boring. Week after week, month after month, you're expected to oversee, or perhaps even lead, a variety of sessions that fall under the category of safety meetings. For some safety managers, the very fact that the meetings are held is a cause for satisfaction. But most have a considerably higher standard. They want a meeting that's not only well run, but well thought out, whose purpose is achieved, and from which all participants take away something of value.

In this Compliance Report, the spotlight is on safety meetings, and especially on innovation. Who's doing what, and how can you and your employees benefit? The format is a "roundtable" of views and suggestions from a variety of safety professionals.

#### **Meeting Blueprint**

Safety meetings are regular (typically weekly or monthly) sessions held to review essential safety topics, teach new skills, meet compliance requirements, review unsafe practices, praise safe behavior, or answer employees' questions. Other meetings focus on new equipment, new hazards, new rules, or changes in processes or equipment. Most experts concur that safety meetings should last from 30 to 45 minutes—an hour gets long.

The exception is the "toolbox" or on-the-job safety talk popularized in the construction trades. These brief sessions, often held standing, may last only 5 to 10 minutes and focus on a very specific task or process to be performed. Finally, there's the safety committee meeting, where members review a punch list of projects under way, plan future audits, go over safety suggestions, and engage in any number of other tasks, depending on the mandate of the safety committee.

The presenters can and should vary. Certainly a trained supervisor is a frequent choice. But everyone agrees that sharing the load can increase the benefit. Employees themselves, a vice president knowledgeable about the subject, or an outside expert can be excellent meeting leaders. Consider inviting a local fire chief to speak on emergency response, an insurance company representative to discuss safe lifting techniques, or a vendor to address use of a new piece of equipment. A fresh face is always a welcome change and encourages attentiveness.

#### **Keepin' It Lively**

The well-organized safety meeting should open with a warm-up; for example, an upbeat anecdote, a report of a safety milestone, or recognition by corporate headquarters of safety efforts. The next phase is the topic presentation. It should be delivered clearly without talking down to employees or using unnecessary jargon. Break the information into "nuggets" that your group can readily grasp. Use a presentation board or overhead projector to reinforce key points. Try to involve participants as much as possible. Ask questions that cannot be answered with "yes" or "no." Encourage participants to relate their own experiences to the topic at hand.

The wrap-up portion should feature a review of key points and should give workers something to "carry away" from the session. This can be done verbally or in the form of a handout. It's also useful to bring the points home with an anecdote or reminder of how the topic fits into the larger safety picture. And whenever feasible, give something to feel good about. For example: "Remember, we've worked more than a million hours without a lost-time accident. If each of us takes the lessons about lockout/tagout we've reviewed today and carries them back on the job, we'll soon be celebrating 1.5 million accident-free hours. Thanks for your time and attention. Have a safe and productive day."

In the following sections, we share the views of a number of safety professionals in the field, those with the day-to-day responsibility of leading—or training others to lead—safety meetings.

#### **High Safety Consulting Services, Ltd., Lancaster, PA**

High Safety Consulting Services, Ltd., of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, serves a wide variety of businesses in the central region of the state, including municipalities, manufacturers, construction companies, and health care facilities. President Steve High explains that his company is especially active in the training of safety committee members. That's because Pennsylvania offers employers a 5 percent discount on their workers' compensation premiums if they establish a certified safety committee. Among other requirements, the committee must have equal representation by managers and employees; the meetings must be structured and have an agenda; and minutes must be taken.

"I've seen a number of innovative approaches to meetings" says High. "A couple of local companies, for example, pay their safety committee members double time when they're doing any work for the committee. That certainly provides an incentive for participation." He adds that if employees do receive extra compensation, "you can hold them to a higher level of productivity and results." High is a strong believer in training safety committees in human relations—without sounding threatening, learning how to tell a co-worker that she needs to put on her safety glasses, for example. He advocates that committees spell out their purpose and scope of influence in a charter that has the endorsement of top management.

The selection of a committee leader has a great deal to do with the success of the meetings, he adds. Although rotating through different members can be a good way to do that, it should be remembered that not everyone is equally qualified to lead meetings. Those who are lacking should seek additional training, or perhaps not take a turn. A good leader keeps the meeting focused on the agenda, without lapsing into insignificant or unrelated topics. As well, the meeting leader should make sure everyone is involved. It's too easy for the committee to simply tack new items on to a complaint list and ship it off to Maintenance. Rather, High says, "Committee members should be assigned responsibility for *resolution* of problems and for creating action plans that state who will do what when." Also, the leader should keep blame off the agenda, focusing instead on positive steps.

High counsels his clients to avoid a potentially dangerous trap in which safety committees identify and document hazards but fail to take corrective action, with the same hazard recurring on meeting agendas month after month. "If something happens around that issue that results in an OSHA inspection, fatality, or catastrophe, OSHA may be able to demonstrate willfulness of the violation, which can translate to criminal liability." So it's very important for the documentation to show a "closing of the loop."

Finally, High suggests that with any type of safety meeting, keep things varied and interesting. If the supervisor typically presents the weekly employee safety meeting, share the task with employees. Change formats—alternate videos, have Jeopardy-type games, humor, drama, demonstrations, and question-and-answer sessions with a trinket or candy bar for correct answers.

### **Kaar Construction Management Services**

President Marko Kaar of Kaar Construction Management Services/Operation Safe Site in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, is a strong believer in technology. And he uses it to enhance safety meetings

### **Better by the Dozen**

Want to sharpen your safety meetings? Consider these 12 pointers:

- Hold formal safety meetings on a regular basis.
- Supplement with brief, informal sessions.
- Keep meetings to a reasonable length—under an hour.
- Plan in advance and have an agenda for every meeting.
- Get management to demonstrate support.
- Have a key manager or line supervisor open the meeting.
- Mention recent safety achievements and trends.
- Encourage statements like, "How my safety training saved me from ..."
- Hit the highlights, but save some details for the Q and A period.
- Get employees involved!
- Sum up the main points and close on an upbeat note.
- Send people out with something memorable, ideally a handout.

he conducts for client contractors. One highly effective strategy is the homemade videos he creates. "I carry around a digital video camcorder and a camera to job-site inspections, and I take both digital and still photos. In our van we have a TV and VCR, so I can plug in the video I've just taken, call the guys in, and they watch and review a 15- or 20-minute video." The most vital aspect of the video is that it reflects the actual worksite, not a generic location.

One of the most common subjects of these videos is fall protection. One might, for example, show improperly adjusted harnesses or unbuckled straps. "I've got some amazing video of lanyards being clipped on to a vertical lifeline, so if the worker fell, he'd fall all the way to the ground," says Kaar. Because he doesn't wish to embarrass anyone, these types of shots tend to focus on the hazardous condition, rather than the responsible individual. "You have to be very diplomatic in the presentation, but the guys learn a lot by seeing themselves in the pictures." He says workers appreciate the fact that someone has taken the time and energy to create this personalized presentation.

Another technique gaining popularity among construction employers, says Kaar, is rotating the task of safety meeting leader among subcontractors on a

project. In this way, the workers learn directly from the subcontractors. A plumber, for example, could talk about soldering safety, and an electrical contractor could address issues such as lockout/tagout. It also helps keep things lively—an important consideration.

### **Torcon, Inc.**

Torcon, of Westfield, New Jersey, is a large (\$400 million) national construction management firm. Typical jobs include airports, hospitals, office buildings, manufacturing plants, and university buildings. According to Safety Director Cindy Santella, every construction project has its own labor/management safety committee, which holds a weekly meeting. Committees include representatives from every trade and subcontractor on the job, as well as someone from Torcon, and an owner representative. The meetings follow a strict agenda that includes safety observations, safety violations, general safety topics, and future safety-related activities.

Using the information presented at the committee meeting, each representative is responsible for a weekly 5- to 15-minute toolbox session for his or her own employees. Although a prepared talk is provided, Torcon recommends that the leaders start by asking questions, rather than by reading the printed material. "For example, start by asking the group, 'What do you know about shoring?', and let them share their own ideas." Then, she says, follow up with the formal points.

Santella says Torcon keeps a variety of safety videos in the contractor trailer; subcontractors have access to these and can even bring a toolbox group in to watch one to reinforce the lesson being taught. Because the safety message is ultimately delivered through the subcontractor representatives, not directly by Torcon, it's important that the subcontractors select the right individual to serve as "the safety middleman."

### **DuPont Safety Resources**

One of the most well-known providers of employer safety services is DuPont of Wilmington, Delaware. Rita Vasta is a project manager with the company's Safety Resources group. "I think we need to go back to the question of 'Why do we need safety meetings?'" she suggests. She offers two primary reasons: One is as a way to positively reinforce safety practices; the other is to foster two-way communication. As for her best ideas about keeping people interested and attentive, Vasta insists that every meeting should have an agenda, with relevant topics. "The worst thing you can do is to have a topic that doesn't relate to the work you're doing. Get feedback to make sure you're covering what workers hold valuable."

And she cautions against letting the safety meeting digress into a general business meeting. "The begin-

ning of the meeting may be an appropriate time to wish someone success on a service anniversary, but it's not the time to discuss the new corporate restructuring plan." She also votes for a short (45 minutes or under) meeting, noting: "I'd rather have a meeting where people hang back afterward to ask questions than watch them slip out the back door."

Like others, Vasta strongly favors trainee participation. She suggests multifunctional team assignments. And whether it's a safety committee meeting or a weekly departmental session, she says peer pressure can be a great boon to improving meetings: A disappointing employee-led meeting in July will likely lead to a much-improved one in August. And she reiterates the need for variety—for example, a mix of video, PowerPoint® computerized presentations, slides, flip-charts, games, scavenger hunts, and so on. As for gauging effectiveness, she suggests: "If people leave the room with at least one new thing to think about, that's an effective meeting." If a safety manager hears shop-floor conversation about the meeting topic or hears that the lessons have been applied at home as well as at work, employees have gotten the message.

### **California Safety Training Corp.**

Founded by President and CEO Ben Laverty, California Safety Training Corp. of Bakersfield is a 14-year-old business that offers safety training to companies across the United States. Clients represent a number of industries, including construction, health care, the military, and agriculture. Whether he's conducting meetings for clients, or teaching employees to hold their own toolbox talks, Laverty says one of his most important teaching principles is "to have fun." One example he cites is that when teaching groups about forklift training safety, he asks one husky member of the audience to simulate a forklift, while Laverty

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pretends to be the cargo. Through an amusing blend of stand-up comedy and good solid teaching, he demonstrates key concepts, including the importance of keeping the load as close as possible to the heels of the forks. And he gets plenty of laughs along the way.

Other meeting tips shared by Laverty:

- Keep the topic relevant to what's happening currently. For example, during California's notorious fog season, make sure safe driving is on the agenda.
- Relate the subject to home safety. If you're talking about chemical reactivity, remind employees that the dangers of mixing ammonia and chlorine are just as serious at home, with under-the-sink products, as they are on the job.
- Always include a test of some sort. Laverty says a "test" can be as simple as three or four written or oral questions. He says it's particularly important to train employees to be responsive because OSHA and other regulatory bodies now routinely question them during inspections.

Laverty suggests that meeting leaders use the "answer, ask, and answer" technique. For example, start with the answer, such as the four ways chemicals can enter the system. Then ask for a repetition,

and follow up with your own repetition of the correct answer. The result? Employees grasp new ideas quickly *and* remember them.

### **Stretch a Little**

The amount of time employees spend in safety meetings is limited, no matter how dedicated the company is to safety. But those few minutes per day or week can make the difference between awareness and apathy. That's why inspiring and educating those responsible for planning and executing meetings at your workplace should be a never-ending item on your to-do list.

The task is serious, but don't hesitate, the experts insist, to get creative about the meetings. Seek additional funds, if necessary. Use outside resources. And don't forget the wealth of information that resides within your own employees—the people who have sat through countless safety meetings typically have good ideas about how to improve them. Don't be afraid to ask for them. [164, 187]

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