

Yes, you can have an effective Joint Occupational Health & Safety Committee!

In Nova Scotia, all health and community services sector workplaces where twenty or more people are regularly employed are required, under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, to have a joint occupational health and safety committee (JOHSC). But all too often, JOHSCs are formed without having the basic building blocks in place to allow them to be effective. This can result in conflict and disagreement amongst JOHSC members, little or no progress on resolving health and safety issues, and a less than successful health and safety management system.

The first of these basic building blocks is a high level of commitment to occupational health and safety (OH&S) by workplace management. True commitment to OH&S must be demonstrated and reinforced on a day to day basis. For the JOHSC, this means that workplace leadership provides consistent support to the committee and its activities, the committee is given the time and resources to do its job, and members are well trained and understand their roles and responsibilities.

Senior management should regularly restate their commitment to the JOHSC and to the involvement of both management and employee members. They also demonstrate commitment by responding to committee recommendations clearly and in a timely manner. Finally, they should establish a process for auditing the JOHSC in order to identify barriers that may reduce the committee's effectiveness.

Another key factor for a successful JOHSC is making sure that everyone in the workplace has a clear understanding of the internal responsibility system (IRS)¹ and how it is supposed to work. The JOHSC is *not* actually part of the IRS. The committee supports and facilitates the IRS, helps to resolve problems that cannot be addressed through the IRS, and helps in establishing organizational health and safety priorities. Many JOHSCs fail because they get bogged in trying to 'do safety' and dealing with issues that should be addressed by the IRS.

Once these building blocks are in place, JOHSCs need an up to date and complete Terms of Reference. This should be created by and agreed upon by all committee members and supported by senior workplace management. It should outline how and when JOHSC meetings will take place, define the specific roles and responsibilities of committee members, identify the training that committee members should receive, describe how issues will be communicated, both between committee members and to everyone in the workplace, define how issues should be brought to the committee and how they will be addressed, and included in the process for resolving conflicts that may arise between committee members.

It is also crucial that JOHSC members be trained to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. Committee members should create a training plan that covers more than just health and safety hazard recognition or workplace inspection. All JOHSC members should be familiar with the occupational health and safety act, and any relevant regulations. They should also fully understand the IRS and how it should work within their workplace. In addition, committee members should receive training in conflict resolution, problem solving and consensus building.

An agreed upon set of annual goals and objectives is another key JOHSC success factor. Goals and objectives should be set for both administrative committee performance, (e.g. how quickly minutes should be distributed) and for specific committee activities, (e.g. slips, trips and falls prevention initiatives). The committee should measure their performance against these goals and objectives in order to identify improvement opportunities and communicate successes to the workplaces. The committee should review their goals and objectives, and their terms of reference document, at least once a year so that necessary changes can be made.

Successful JOHSCs depend on an informed workforce. As such, the JOHSC should make sure that all staff receive specific training on how to report health and safety concerns and that supervisors and managers are trained on how to respond appropriately to these concerns. It is worth repeating that everyone in the workplace needs to understand what the internal responsibility system is and how it should work.

An effective JOHSC is an absolutely vital part of a best-practice health and safety management system. JOHSCs should be seen as an organizational asset and not just as a legislative requirement. By making sure that key, basic building blocks are in place, organizations help set the stage for JOHSC success, and create an environment where the work of the committee is valued by all staff.

1. Department of Labour, Nova Scotia, *Promoting the Internal Responsibility System in Nova Scotia*, 2008, Section 7, page 6

<https://novascotia.ca/lae/healthandsafety/docs/IRSConsultation.pdf>