

Health and Safety Committees

Principles for enabling effective
workplace representation

Introduction

Health and Safety Committees (H&S Committees) are one of the most effective mechanisms to facilitate workplace representation, consultation, co-operation and resolution of issues in relation to work health and safety.

This document is a guide and intended to provide key principles which organisations can consider to support their H&S Committees to operate in an effective manner, helping to facilitate workplace engagement, participation and representation.

It has been developed in partnership with New Zealand Institute of Safety Management, Public Service Association, and Government Health & Safety Lead.

Why have a H&S Committee?

H&S Committees serve as mechanisms for understanding how work is performed and for workers to offer insights, comments and advice on health and safety systems. They are not decision-making bodies.

The operation of H&S Committees aligns with the objectives of the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. Furthermore, they help fulfil the requirements outlined in Section 61 of the Act by providing a reasonable opportunity for workers to engage with health and safety and to participate in the development of health and safety systems.

Principles and enablers

Te Tiriti o Waitangi

- Honouring the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi by supporting Te ao Māori i approaches to health and safety.
- Ensuring Māori are able to participate in developing a health and safety system that works for Māori.

Collaborative environment

- Fostering a collaborative environment where workers and the organisation work together in the H&S Committee to improve health and safety outcomes through proactive engagement and preventive measures.

Effective communication

- Creating an enabling environment where members are empowered to speak up.
- All members should feel safe raising and discussing issues within an environment where they are not only heard but also listened to.
- The organisation must respond to concerns and issues raised by the H&S Committee in a timely manner.

Representation and participation

- Ensuring workers are adequately represented and heard in health and safety matters.
- At least half of the H&S Committee members must be workers who have not been nominated by the organisation.
- Including Health & Safety Representatives (H&S Reps) and Union Representatives within the H&S Committee is ideal.

Role clarity and support

- Ensuring all members understand their roles, who they represent and are provided with the necessary time, resources and training to fulfil their duties.

Accessibility and equity

- Ensuring workers are aware of the activities of the H&S Committee and have access to information about discussions and decisions.
- Proactively removing barriers to participation, especially for workers from vulnerable communities and those in higher-risk roles.
- Agree how to share information between participating workers when there are shared risks.

Practical approaches

Structure and purpose

The structure of the H&S Committee must actively support businesses and workers to collaborate on ensuring worker health and safety. Consideration needs to be given to organisational size and spread as well as the diversity of workforce and work groups to ensure all workers have an opportunity to be heard.

H&S Committees need to strike a balance between addressing role-specific and site-specific issues responsively while also making recommendations and providing input on organisational-level strategies, policies, processes, plans and initiatives.

Many H&S Committees struggle to be effective due to a lack of clear direction, mandate and resourcing. To address these challenges and enhance the effectiveness of H&S Committees, consider the following practical approaches:

✓ *Agreed makeup and procedures*

The make-up and procedures for H&S Committees should be agreed upon by the organisation, its workers and their representatives. This agreement is often part of a Worker Participation Agreement (WPA).

✓ *Inclusive representation*

Consider the interactions between different workers, workgroups and H&S Reps in the H&S Committee's structure. Ensure input from across the workforce, including hard to engage workers such as night shift workers, casual workers and subcontractors.

✓ *Effective flow of information*

For organisations with multiple levels of H&S Committees, support a smooth information flow between the committees, considering timing of meetings and papers. Define what issues are typically addressed at local level versus those at the regional or organisational levels.

✓ *Annual workplan*

Successful H&S Committees often agree on a workplan for the year and make it happen through sub-groups and working groups. Providing the H&S Committee with administrative resource can help keep things on track.

✓ *Election of representatives*

Wherever possible, workers should elect their representatives to the H&S Committee, including H&S Reps and union delegates.

✓ *Sufficient time for duties*

Organisations must give H&S Committee members sufficient time to undertake their duties, including preparation for meetings and project work, not just the meeting time itself.

✓ *Training for members*

Providing training for H&S Committee members can enhance their effectiveness and the overall performance of the H&S Committee.