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Maine Department of Labor

Maine Bureau of Labor Standards

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Maintaining Dynamic Teams

By Marilyn Burgess

Maintaining dynamic, productive employee teams has become a new challenge for many employers. How much influence should be exerted? Should management keep hands off? Why does a team lose spirit and drift? Where can more information be received?

If you believe that employees have knowledge and perspectives that are valuable in making good decisions about an organization, you have won half the battle. Your employees will know when their input is valued. They want to see that their input influences decisions.

This concept is relatively new. Both employees and management have a new set of skills to learn to accomplish tasks in a group. The process will take time to evolve, and there may be some old animosities to overcome.

All groups go through a period of sorting out and choosing a leader. Some groups have people who will continue to fight for leadership, and a timid group may not be able to choose. It is important that groups choose a formal leader to coordinate activities. If this is slow in happening, the group will have difficulty getting down to business.

Employee members may be intimidated by management members and be reluctant to speak openly. Group members trained in group communications will find gentle ways to move the group toward cohesion.

PROVIDE TRAINING. Everyone needs training to gain additional knowledge and talk to people from other companies who may have faced the same problems. All team members should be trained in group and meeting dynamics so they understand the processes that occur as they work together.

Lewiston Public Works: A Successful Team

Chris Branch, director; Peter Chrichton, former Safety Officer; and Dick Ward, Chair of the Safety Team are enthusiastic about their groups accomplishments and the overall safety effort. They have cut Workers’ Compensation costs from $300,000 to $50,000 a year while eliminating serious injuries!

Recommendations for Others:
- Recruit employees from as many different departments as possible.
- Mix in a lot of fun! We have safety awards and send people for special safety training.
- Have goal setting meetings early each year to determine what was done well last year and what needs improvement.
- Keep people involved and active.
- Respect employee suggestions. Be honest, fair, and respond to the suggestions even if you cannot do them or do them soon.
- Practice what you preach. Set a good example.
- Top management needs to be supportive and emphasize safety.

PROVIDE STRUCTURE. See that the group establishes regular meeting times, and that decisions about who will do what are included in the minutes. See that an agenda is prepared for each meeting to keep the work on track.

ESTABLISH GOALS. Management needs to develop goals initially. For example, “We want you to look at all our stitching jobs and develop a plan for improving work” (Continued on page 2)
stations by December 1, 1996." This provides a focus to get teams started. Once the team is established, it should participate in goal setting.

**PROVIDE RESOURCES AND ENCOURAGE THE GROUP TO USE THEM.** Encourage the group to develop guidelines for group behavior. Who will make the contact with an outside resource? Who has authority to speak for the group or the employer? Will individuals be allowed to do informal surveys or does the group need to authorize them? Establish rules early and make sure they are clear to avoid problems later. Also decide on a budget and determine who has authority to spend.

**PROVIDE A MECHANISM FOR FEEDBACK.** Employee surveys, posting meeting minutes, providing copies of meeting minutes to team members, advertising team accomplishments are all a means of providing the team with feedback.

People become anxious when they don’t:
- know what they are supposed to do
- know what the standard for performance is
- what resources are available to accomplish tasks
- receive feedback about how close they are to getting things right

For teams this means that nothing gets done and people lose interest. Working with groups is a hands on skill. The good news is that it can be learned.

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**Where Did the Money Go?**

Do you want to know how much certain kinds of injuries and illnesses cost or how much money is spent on medical costs, indemnity, or lump sum settlements for work-related injuries and illnesses? The Workers’ Compensation Board has legal authority to collect this information, but until recently no emphasis was placed on quality collection of this data.

Over the last two years, staff of the Workers’ Compensation Board’s Payment’s Division and the Research & Statistics Division of the Bureau of Labor Standards have worked together to develop computer programs to identify cases where required cost data has not been sent in by insurers. Research Division staff wrote a proposal emphasizing the need for the data to make informed decisions and stating a plan for collection. As a result of the joint efforts, we are getting information on over 6,500 cases occurring since 1993.

Don’t expect to see data released soon. Other programs were developed to detect other possible unreported information and the data needs to be checked for accuracy. With cooperation, two years from now we may be able to answer questions that are not possible now. This will allow us to better focus our placement of safety and health services.

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**Safety & Health Information**

The following information is available in a brochure (tri-fold) format:
- Work-Related Injuries and Illnesses, 1994
- Lost-Time Injuries to Nurse’s Aides in Nursing Homes in Maine, 1993-1994
- Sprains and Strains by Overexertion in Maine, 1993-1994
- Back Injuries in Maine, 1993-1994

Call (207)-624-6440 to get your free brochure.

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**Contest!**

Write us with your ideas on ways employers and employees can work together for safety. We will publish the top 10 in a future issue and give those people certificates. Our fax is (207)-624-6449 and our address is Bureau of Labor Standards, 45 State House Station, Augusta, Maine 04333-0045. Please write Safety & Health Monitor Contest on your entry.
We asked Jay Warren, a 13 year veteran of the Bureau of Labor Standards, the following question: What are some of the problems that you have discovered during on-site visits that could have led to severe injury or death? Listed below are some of the problems.

"I discovered one plant with 80 workers in a building which had an ungrounded electrical system. The following are also problems: 1) ungrounded electrical units; 2) frayed cords; and 3) missing third prongs on extension cords."

Employers could take the following steps:

• Purchase receptacle testers at the local hardware store. This will show if something is wrong with the way the electrical circuit is wired.
• Hire a local electrician to find and fix hazards.
• Notify C.M.P. if the problem is outside the facility.
• Either have a sure-grounded electrical program or a GFI program.
• Make sure extension cords are grounded.

"I have found unguarded machines such as saws, grinders, or conveyors that could lead to cuts or amputations. Any rotating shafts must be guarded."

Employers could take the following steps:

• Guard equipment according to manufacturer’s specifications and OSHA requirements.
• Don’t change or modify guards without the written consent of the manufacturer.
• Note: Radial arm saws can’t go out past the edge of the table. You can correct that by putting a self-return device on the machine to cause the saw to slide back into place.

"Inspectors commonly see no standard rails on staging. In one instance six masonry workers were 42 feet above ground and the staging was not tied off."

Employers could take the following steps:

• Provide back rails. Erect staging according to manufacturer’s specifications. Get trained by the manufacturer in how to erect the staging. If the staging is 30 feet horizontally and 26 feet vertically then tie it to the building.

"I have discovered people transferring chemicals from their original containers into other containers that are not marked to show what is in them."

The dangers of doing this include ill health effects from exposure to the chemicals, flammability, explosions, and reactive chemicals (e.g., ammonia and bleach) which can be fatal.

Employers could take the following steps:

• Review their HazCom program to make sure they are in compliance with the safety and health regulations.
• Secondary containers must be marked. Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) are required for all chemicals in the workplace.

Money for Safety and Health

The Occupational Safety and Health Loan Fund has assisted 28 Maine businesses purchase equipment to improve workplace health and safety. The amount loaned exceeds $850,000. Companies have used loans to purchase:

• Ventilation systems to reduce toxic exposures
• Trench shoring equipment to prevent cave-ins
• Patient transfer equipment to reduce back injuries to nursing staff
• Respirators to protect workers from inhalation hazards

(Continued on page 4)
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(Continued from page 3)

- Eyewash stations and safety showers
- Ergonomically designed equipment to reduce cumulative trauma disorders
- Hydraulic lifts to prevent back injury from material handling
- Machine guarding improvements

Loans of up to $50,000 are available with a 10 year pay back period at an interest rate of three percent.

Articles are written by individual authors and are not products of the Bureau of Labor Standards or the editors. Information in the articles should not be viewed as a substitute for policy or for regulations. The editors are Bradford Brown, Planning & Research Associate II and Jonathan Lepoff, Staff Development Coordinator.

From the Director’s Desk

It’s hard to believe the year is already half over. The dedicated staff of the Bureau have been busy. Among our accomplishments are:

- 4,553 employees trained
- 56 chemical substance inspections
- 110 consultation visits
- 118 compliance inspections
- 95 injury profiles and information requests

We recently completed a strategic plan and later this year we will unveil the following new programs:

- Young Worker Project
- Maine Public 30 Project
- Outreach and Education Program

The bureau is committed to providing the highest quality services. If you have questions, comments, or suggestions for us, please contact me:

Alan Hinsey, Telephone 624-6400
E-mail: webmaster_bls@state.me.us

Safety and Health Monitor

In This Issue

Maintaining Dynamic Teams .......... 1
Contest .................................. 2
Where Did the Money Go? .......... 2
Safety & Health Information .......... 2
Notes From the Field ................ 3
Money for Safety & Health .......... 3
From the Director’s Desk .......... 4
Upcoming Training (Insert)