



JEROME E. SPEAR

# A TEAM APPROACH TO INJURY AND ILLNESS PREVENTION

Ten factors for creating a self-managing safety leadership team.

**B**usinesses spend \$170 billion a year on costs associated with occupational injuries and illnesses—expenditures that come straight out of company profits.

Workplaces that establish safety and health management systems can reduce their injury and illness costs by 20% to 40%. In today's business environment, these costs can be the difference between operating in the black and running in the red.

Small businesses have the added challenge of staying abreast of OSHA regulations and typically don't have the resources to employ full-time trained safety professionals to direct, control, manage, and administer the safety and health management systems for the company. These responsibilities are largely neglected even when safety management has been assigned to a manager—typically one with other primary and sometimes competing job responsibilities.

An alternative approach to this predicament is to form and develop a self-managing safety leadership team.

A team approach is also a way to get more employees involved in the safety process and for employees to play a more active role in preventing injuries and illnesses. Other benefits include greater knowledge and experience, more approaches to solving problems, and better execution of the safety program. However, if haphazardly formed, any work team will ultimately have problems sustaining safety management.

**Does this action reduce the risk of injury or illnesses?  
Does it help us achieve an optimal level of safety?**

Consider the following 10 factors needed for creating a self-managing safety leadership team.

## 1. Clear Direction

Successful self-managing teams have a clear understanding what their purpose is, why the group exists, and what they are trying to accomplish.

For example, one team stated its mission as follows:

“The safety leadership team exists to identify, evaluate, and manage the risk of injuries and illnesses to employees and visitors at our job sites in order to achieve OSHA com-

pliance and control losses. The safety leadership team will do so in a way that directs and manages the organization's resources efficiently in an effort to achieve an optimal level of safety and health for the organization.”

This statement of direction is clear and simple as it contains only a few objectives. But those objectives can allow the team to make intelligent tradeoffs. When faced with a decision regarding whether an engineering control should be implemented or a safety procedure written, the statement invites the group to ask: Does this action reduce the risk of injury or illnesses? Does it help us achieve an optimal level of safety? Is it feasible?

The statement is also clear about the group's purpose but doesn't say how the team should get there. Two common errors in setting direction is (1) failing to set any direction at all, and (2) setting a direction that is all about means (the how) but doesn't specify the ends (the why) (Wageman 1997).

## 2. Common Performance Goals

Common goals are critical to the safety team's success. In other words, there should be no hidden agendas. For a goal to enhance performance, it has to match up with the team's overall direction, be challenging, and completed by a specified deadline. Unlike the statement of overall purpose, goals should be specific descriptions of work the team is to accomplish within a specific timeframe.

Examples of some goals for a safety leadership team might include:

- “Provide accident investigation training to all field supervisors by the end of the year.”
- “Conduct a risk assessment for all work tasks by the first quarter of the year.”
- “Prepare a job safety analysis for all high-risk activities by the third quarter of the year.”
- “Conduct a job site safety audit for each crew on a monthly basis.”
- “Update the company's written injury and illness prevention program by the second quarter of the year.”

The safety leadership team should determine how they will achieve these targets. Such goals and objectives should frequently be reviewed and updated, as necessary, during team meetings to periodically measure the team's performance and reinforce the group's direction.

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### 3. Definition of Roles

The basic roles of a team include a facilitator, a leader, and team members. The facilitator is an integral part of the infrastructure necessary to the attainment of continuous improvement—providing the link between the team and the overall business strategy (Morris and Haigh 1994). In-house facilitators must be chosen with care, as replacing them can be debilitating to group dynamics. Outside facilitators are good if they are already known and have earned the respect of team members. The advantage of outside facilitators is it is easier and less traumatic to remove them if they prove to be unsuited for the team (Ousnamer 1997).

The role of the leader is most critical as the team develops (Wageman 1997). Initially, the leader assists with the design of the team, provides clear direction, and helps the team progress. Later, the leader acts as a coach and monitors the team's progress.

The roles of each team member must be clearly understood. Each member has unique attributes and should recognize why each one was selected for the team. Their roles may or may not be formally defined, but they should at least be communicated to avoid duplication of efforts and conflict. The leader may choose to discuss these roles individually with each member or lead a discussion with the group to make sure the roles of each member are plainly understood.

### 4. Real Team Function

The basic elements of their work should require members to work together to complete significant tasks (Wageman 1997). Spending time together as a whole group is critical.

Oftentimes, I observed the primary function of traditional safety committees was to conduct routine safety inspections (by department, area, or crew). One problem with this approach is simply performing a safety inspection can usually be done by one or two people and doesn't require the work of the entire team. Such tasks can be assigned to other employees or rotated among employees to get more people involved in the safety program.

However, a better use of the safety leadership team is for the group to train field employees how to conduct safety inspections. As other employees conduct safety inspections, the safety leadership team can then review their inspection findings, prioritize their findings by the risk of injury or illness, determine the root causes, and evaluate possible corrective actions.

### 5. Visible Management Support and Commitment

Team members must perceive that management fully supports and is committed to safety and the team's efforts. If not, team members will lose dedication and interest.

Management should visibly show interest in the safety team's activities and communicate a sense of urgency for the group's purpose. By doing so, members will be assured their purpose is in line with the company's overall business strategy. Management should not wait until problems

within the team develop, but instead show a proactive interest in the group.

### 6. Mutual Responsibility and Group Accountability

One problem when work teams are carelessly formed is that accountability may be lost (Brookes 1993). Therefore, the leader must determine in advance before the team is formed how members will be held accountable as a group if a substandard effort is produced. Will the entire team be replaced? On the other hand, how will the group be recognized for performing outstanding work?

The important point is the whole group must be held accountable for poor work. Likewise, the whole group should be recognized for solving problems. The leader must clearly express to the team members this responsibility is mutual, along with the potential consequences of poor performance.

### 7. Authority to Manage

Having the authority to manage the team's tasks will most likely lead to a self-managing team. Such authority means the safety leadership team, not the leader, has the authority to make decisions over basic team functions (Wageman 1997). If management or the team leader interferes with this authority, the team's sense of ownership will be compromised.

Instead, the leader should explicitly address the team's authority and the boundaries around it. The team should understand the leader is available for consultation, but the ultimate decision-making authority for solving safety-related problems belongs to the safety leadership team.

### 8. Team Size

The primary factor in determining the size of any problem-solving team is the number of tasks, the skills needed, and how complex are the functions required. The key for work teams to be successful is for the first person in the workflow to be interdependent with the last person and for all to be mutually accountable to each other for results.

Although there have been successful teams comprised of 40 or more people, teams with a large number of members tend to lose mutual accountability. Ideally, teams should consist of between 5 and 15 members (Barnard 1999).

### 9. Availability of Resources

A safety leadership team needs the necessary tools to perform their work. Safety teams should not be formed from the bottom-up and have to go begging or searching for the appropriate resources. This should be considered when the team is initially formed, and the team leader should negotiate with management what resources are needed.

Such resources include reasonable times allocated for regular meetings, meeting spaces, means to attend meetings remotely, access to relevant data and reports, time to perform team tasks, and additional training. Some upfront team-building training or workshops may be helpful.

## 10. Trust and Interdependence

These both go hand in hand. There's no magic recipe to instantly creating a high level of trust among a group. Instead, it often takes a long time to develop through collaborative sharing in a trusting environment where communication is open and honest, and where team members get along (Herzog 2001). By the same token, trust can be lost in minutes when there is dishonesty among team members or members don't get along.

In essence, trust and interdependence is a relationship issue that depends on daily interactions. The longer the team has stable membership, the more likely the team will form a strong cohesiveness among each other. [WWJ](#)

## References

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## DACUM Codes

To help meet your professional needs, this article covers skills and competencies found in DACUM charts for drillers and pump installers. DO refers to the drilling chart and PI refers to the pumps chart. The letter and number immediately following is the skill on the chart covered by the article. This article covers:

**DOD-8, DOK-2, DOK-9, DOL-1, DOL-2, PIG-3**

More information on DACUM and the charts are available at [www.NGWA.org](http://www.NGWA.org).

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**Jerome E. Spear**, CSP, CIH, is president of J.E. Spear Consulting and has more than 22 years of experience helping organizations prevent injuries and illnesses, control losses, and achieve regulatory compliance. He held the positions of technical services manager with XL Specialty Risk Consulting and corporate industrial hygiene manager for Chicago Bridge and Iron Co., a worldwide steel fabricator and construction company.

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