

On the cover

At Seastar Chemicals, JHSC inspections require the whole crew to suit up. Here, packaging technician Levi Jones (far left) shows his daily work procedures to the committee for inspection.



Effective safety committees cornerstones of healthy workplaces

By Gail Johnson

On April 3, changes to the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Regulation will come into effect that require employers to make some changes to how their joint health and safety committees (JHSC) operate. New regulations will require that employers evaluate the effectiveness of their committee, provide additional training to new members, and further define how the committee participates in incident investigations. While these practices will be new for some, for Seastar Chemicals and K-Bro Linen Systems, supporting their JHSC is already second nature.

As a global supplier of high-purity acids, Sidney, B.C.'s Seastar Chemicals specializes in the kind of hazardous substances most people only vaguely remember from high-school chemistry classes: sulphuric acid, ammonium hydroxide, and nitric acid, to name a few.

Seastar's products are used in laboratory applications and in semi-conductor and micro-electronics industries. Given the volume of hazardous material they handle daily, safe practices are paramount, and the company of almost 50 people considers safety its number-one priority.

The backbone of their safety program is their joint health and safety committee. The committee consists of a multidisciplinary team represented by workers from several different departments with a wide range of skill sets, as well as employer representatives who include the manager of health, safety, and environment.

Consider one example of how the company strives to keep its workers out of harm's way, with the JHSC playing an active supporting role. Seastar recently conducted a comprehensive hazard, impact, risk, and vulnerability analysis, looking at potential dangers both within its plant and out. After drafting a report, the company reached out to local organizations, including the Capital Regional District Hazmat Response Service, RCMP, and local fire departments, to provide feedback on its findings. From there, it identified five top hazards, including chemical spills and earthquakes, that the committee immediately started working toward mitigating.

Committee members also conduct regular, thorough workplace inspections and are involved in incident investigations. They help resolve health and safety concerns that they themselves, or coworkers, have identified. They track incidents and near misses, which are shared and analyzed at monthly meetings that involve the entire company. They also do extensive training.

For vice-president and general manager Ken Lewis, ensuring that the company's JHSC is effective is a non-negotiable practice that aligns with the company's core values, the kingpin of which is safety.

"Every month we assemble the whole company for a review of how the company is performing overall, and we review metrics," Lewis says. "We always make a point of starting with any safety-related metrics as our primary focus before we talk about financial performance and other goals so that people understand what our priorities are and where we need to go from there.

"Our number-one core value is safety, but even fiscally it's the right investment to make," he adds. "There's such a huge cost to not doing it right. Anybody who doesn't appreciate that the investment upfront is to prevent injury, train workers, and make sure people are doing things the way they need to be done, is going to pay for it dearly later. It's not what it costs, but what it saves."

The JHSC at Seastar is an example of how such a committee can do much more than help an employer comply with regulations. At their best, they are the heartbeat of an organization's safety culture.

"When you foster a safe work environment, and you start to get staff to buy-in, it's a much happier place."

—Kevin McElgunn, general manager,
K-Bro Linen Systems

On the floor at their Burnaby headquarters, production manager Orlando Murillo, JHSC worker representatives Amor Rivera and Lani Indangan, and maintenance employee Lito Gorospe discuss safety procedures at K-Bro Linen Systems Inc.



Safety committee basics

A JHSC is one component of an employer's broader occupational health and safety management system. Consisting of equal numbers of employer representatives and workers, the JHSC develops and implements safety programs, policies, and procedures to help workplaces keep their most valuable asset, their workers, safe.

Any employer with twenty or more full- and part-time workers must establish and maintain a joint health and safety committee. In companies employing nine to twenty people, the Regulation requires a worker health and safety representative, whose duties are the same as those of a committee. Each member of a joint health and safety committee is entitled to eight hours of leave per year to attend occupational health and safety training courses run or approved by WorkSafeBC.

Other committee activities include, ensuring incident investigations and regular workplace inspections are carried out, and monitoring other safety programs, such as emergency plans and WHMIS programs.

Employer support helps committees succeed

Nanaimo-based WorkSafeBC occupational hygiene officer Jeanette Campbell is part of WorkSafeBC's Program and Committee Evaluation (PACE) initiative, which in part is exploring how safety committees throughout the province are operating, and what could be done to improve their efficiency.

She says what helps a committee succeed is thorough training and employer support.

"I talk to employers about whether they feel they are getting good value out of their committee," she says. "To be successful, committee members must have the skills. They need to understand their roles and responsibilities and know how to identify hazards in their workplace. When workers bring concerns to them, they must be able to understand the issues and how to communicate with the workers and their fellow committee members. These skills are necessary in order to fulfill their role of promoting health and safety in the workplace. A strong committee that has built trust with their peers and management can help engage the workforce and make changes to the culture.

JHSC members Tony Purewal, Penny Malinowski, Shaun Cembella, Garry Towle, and Tim MacInnis test the emergency shower at Seastar Chemicals.



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—Jeanette Campbell, WorkSafeBC
occupational hygiene officer

“If an employer doesn’t recognize the value of the committee or communicate this to their workers, then no one wants to participate, which limits the opportunity for the JHSC to effect change,” she adds. “It’s not just about the coffee and doughnuts.

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Seastar makes a point of recognizing committee members, while going above and beyond what’s required by the Regulation when it comes to JHSCs.

“We’ve never had any trouble attracting people to become members of the team,” says Garry Towle, Seastar’s manager of health, safety, and environment. “In many cases, people are waiting for a vacancy so they can join. It gets a lot of visibility and it’s such an important focus for us that people want to be involved.”

WorkSafeBC’s Don MacFadgen, Prevention Field Services supervisor in Nanaimo, notes that the duties and functions of the committee are outlined in the *Worker’s Compensation Act*. Tasks listed here include advising the employer on proposed changes to the workplace, such as significant changes to equipment and machinery, or work processes that may affect the health or safety of workers.

There are several ways in which employers must support a committee. They are required to provide resources, such as paid time from work to participate in inspections and investigations, as well as equipment, premises, and clerical support to carry out other duties. Employers must also respond to written recommendations from the committee in writing within 21 days.

“Generally, the most effective committees are when members are able to focus on their duties as committee members, not just on their roles in the organization,” MacFadgen says.

K-Bro Linen Systems Inc. is an employer that throws its full support behind its JHSC. The largest provider of laundry and linen services in Canada, the company has 280 employees at its Burnaby headquarters alone and a proactive six-member safety committee there.

Sophia Wei, the company’s OHS coordinator, says the support of senior management, as well as open communication and collaboration, help make the committee function successfully.

“We’re very busy in the summer, but no matter how busy our production schedule is, we have regular meetings and safety inspections and training. We have effective meetings too: we follow a set agenda. We come up with action plans and safety statistics; each committee member brings in new business or areas of concern. It’s important to follow the agenda to ensure committee recommendations are being followed. You don’t solve the problem if the recommendations aren’t implemented.”

Kevin McElgunn, K-Bro general manager, says the committee is a cornerstone of the company’s safety program. The benefits of investing in it go far beyond complying with regulations.

“When you foster a safe work environment, and you start to get staff to buy-in, it’s a much happier place,” McElgunn says. “It has to do with culture. I think some employers might see it more as a financial burden. But history has proven that a safe environment is much more profitable and makes for a much better work environment. That culture comes from the support of the employer.” ☺

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—Ken Lewis, vice-president and general manager, Seastar Chemicals

For more information

There are many resources on forming and training a JHSC at worksafebc.com, including:

- *The Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee Foundation Workbook*
- The Joint Health and Safety Committee Member Training web page, which includes information on training providers and where to get education
- *The Reference Guide for Employer Incident Investigations*, which is intended for anyone who conducts or participates in investigations

You can also call our toll-free Prevention Information Line at 1.888.621.SAFE (7233).