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The Importance of **Food Safety Training**



As an inspector, it's frustrating to walk into a food facility where the manager, director, or owner is very knowledgeable about food safety, but the employees know little or nothing.

Yes, the person in charge of the facility needs to be able to demonstrate food safety knowledge, but are they the one actually handling the food? Inadequate training and education of food employees will create problems in any facility.

I often question food employees on inspections—Do you know why you are doing XYZ? To which they reply, “Because that is how I was told to do it.” Management often reacts to these conversations with reasons why they don't provide more training and education to their food handlers. Responses usually relate to both time and money. But there are ways to train employees without spending an exceptional amount of either. You need to think outside the box. There's no reason for employees to handle food in an unsafe manner. Take the time to train, and your facility's clients will be much safer.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO TRAIN STAFF

Employees Learn to Appreciate Their Jobs

Workers may know *what* they have to do when they come to work, but do they know *why*? I'm a firm believer that workers who understand how connected they are to keeping the public safe feel empowered and do a much better job. Even the most seemingly meaningless job becomes important. Going to work every day doing the same thing becomes monotonous, causing employees to question why they must do tasks certain ways and become lazy about their duties. Training workers will show them why safe food handling is critical. They will become empowered with the knowledge that what they do every day makes them directly responsible for the health and safety of the customers. Suddenly the job becomes much less tedious. Employees who thought their jobs were low risk now start to understand that there's a much higher risk involved.

Behavior Changes

One of the best ways to instill proper procedures in people is to change their behaviors. Training and ongoing application and reinforcement of that training is key. Ongoing reinforcement will eventually change their behavior. Before you know it, food safety practices will become second nature to them.

Quality Control Improves

Believe it or not, good food safety practices will save you money. Food safety is an integral part of quality control. Fewer foods will be disposed of due to contamination or spoilage, money will be saved, and your reputation will flourish as you serve better and safer food.

Foodborne Illness is Less Likely

Person-to-person contact is the main method for transferring pathogens. Workers who are properly trained in good food handling practices will be less likely to be the source of contamination within the facility. According to the CDC, infected employees are the source of contamination in approximately one in five foodborne illness disease outbreaks. Most of those outbreaks are fecal-oral transmission.

Understanding employee health issues, knowing how to keep equipment clean and sanitized properly, and comprehending time and temperature relationships with pathogens will all reduce your chances of an outbreak. How do you accomplish all of this? By educating the food handler. Pathogens cannot be seen. Out of sight out of mind? This should never be the case. Workers need to understand that just because pathogens aren't visible, it doesn't mean they aren't there. Training will reinforce this concept.

Health Codes Require It

In most regulatory jurisdictions only managers need to be “certified.” Why train employees? Most food safety regulations require it. Most jurisdictions that follow the FDA Model Food Code require that food employees have “working knowledge” of food safety as it relates to their duties within the food facility. What is “working knowledge”? From an inspector's perspective, it doesn't mean that they are fluent in microbiology. No one expects that level of knowledge. Most inspectors will talk with employees while they are performing inspections and ask basic food safety questions. How the employees answer these questions gives the inspector a good idea whether they really understand food safety principles. Stating you should train staff because the law requires it is not, in my opinion, a valid reason

Continued on page 12

to train, but let's face it...the law requires it, so you should be training your staff.

Employees Are the Food Handlers

Food employees are actually the ones handling food, typically not managers. This is not meant to downplay the importance of having a manager who is a Certified Food Handler, but more to reiterate that food employees are the ones who really need to understand food safety. They are the ones working with food all day long. You can send a manager to the best food safety course in the world, but if they don't take that knowledge back and teach it to the staff that handles food, it's not worth anything.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

There's no lack of food safety training materials available to the foodservice industry. You need to use what's out there. Managers, owners, and foodservice directors have given me numerous



excuses why they don't train food employees more often. The most popular reasons include time, money, lack of interest, and employee turnover. Honestly, none of these are valid reasons not to train employees in good food safety handling practices.

I'd love to say you should send all of your employees to formal food safety training with a qualified training company, but that simply may not be feasible or practical. You need to think outside the box. Training does not have to be traditional learning via classroom or computer. You can provide training in many small ways every day.

First and foremost, you need to know how your employees learn. You must provide materials and use methods to help food employees understand the reasons why proper safety practices are important to prevent illnesses, deaths, and loss of income

and reputation that could result from a foodborne outbreak. Some people simply do not do well reading manuals placed in front of them. They are more visual learners and learn by listening, seeing, or experiencing (oral culture) rather than reading (print culture). Studies have shown that oral culture learners are predominant in the food industry (Beegle, 2004). Employees need to be able to relate to their training. The language needs to be familiar and they must be able to connect what they are learning to personal experiences.

Using the Beegle study, the FDA has developed materials to use to modify the behavior of food employees who are oral culture learners. They suggest several ideas for communicating food safety concepts with oral culture learners:

- Use stories and sayings with vivid examples to allow food employees to “feel” the impact of a behavior.
- Stress the importance of role models who show and model

First and foremost, you need to know how your employees learn. You must provide materials and use methods to help food employees understand the reasons why proper food safety practices are important...

- appropriate behavior in supportive ways.
- Whenever possible, information should be provided by people with whom the food employees have a relationship.
- Use familiar words and examples that food employees can relate to.
- Present information verbally and often.
- Make eye contact (depending on culture).
- Use simple signs/posters as reminders.
- Focus on the big picture, not the gory details.
- Allow for two-way communication.
- Demonstrate concepts and have food employees demonstrate the concepts back to you.

Answers to FPC Review Questions

CDMs who answer the FPC Review Questions on page 14 of this issue can check their responses against the answer key found on page 38. This “self check” allows you to confirm your understanding of the test questions.

Training materials for the FDA Oral Culture Learner Project can be found at: <http://www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/RetailFoodProtection/IndustryandRegulatoryAssistanceandTrainingResources/ucm212661.htm>

Take the time to provide short lessons each week. Train regularly in small doses to avoid food safety overload. Here are some general ideas.

- Hang up new food safety posters. Posters that are around all the time are never looked at. Put up fresh posters with different ideas every month.
- Announce a food safety contest with employees (for example, a handwashing contest).
- Make a game out of a food safety concept (maybe a scavenger hunt or a Glo Germ™ demonstration).
- Take 30 minutes at the end of the week or on a slow day to discuss an issue that may have occurred that week, or a food safety concept you wish to tighten up. Include everyone in the discussion.
- Take a few moments to demonstrate to an employee how to perform a new task and verbally explain the ‘why’ along with the ‘how’.
- Slip a food safety message into paychecks or paperwork sent home with employees.

Your responsibility as an owner, manager, or foodservice director is to keep your staff informed and trained on food safety. It really is not enough just to teach “how” things are done. Take the time to teach and reinforce the “why.” You can’t expect behavior to change if the context of ‘why’ is because “it is the law” or simply “you will make people sick.”

Owners, managers, and directors may not learn the same way as food employees. Most foodservice directors (and regulators) are print culture learners and can read manuals and written format materials to learn effectively. That is not the case with most food employees. Train to your staff’s needs, not yours. Use multiple methods and learning styles. Make learning fun, not a chore. You should also set the example. If your staff must wear hairnets or hats while in the kitchen then managers, directors, and owners should have to as well. Wash your hands whenever you enter the kitchen, even if you don’t plan to touch food. Employees will mimic your behaviors, and before long it will become their habit as well.

Never underestimate the power of knowledge; even in its simplest form it can be very powerful.

“It’s all to do with training: you can do a lot if you’re properly trained.” Queen Elizabeth II

To read Dr. Donna Beegle’s study, visit: <http://public.health.oregon.gov/HealthyEnvironments/FoodSafety/Documents/ehsnet.pdf> 

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