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Promoting a
Food Safety Culture
in Your Facility

by Melissa Vaccaro, MS, CHO

People are often 'stuck' in their ways. So, how can you change employee habits and improve the food safety culture in your facilities? What *is* a food safety culture?

Most describe a food safety 'culture' as a behavior-based system. It focuses not only on the facility processes, but on the people and organizational culture of the facility. These systems must be shared by all levels of the organization, not just management. Communication is an essential part

of a working food safety culture. A food safety culture is how safety behaviors are routinely practiced and demonstrated, and what employees think of food safety.

In a study by Neal, et al. (2012), participants conveyed that "the most important factors for developing a food safety culture are management commitment and worker food safety behavior. Results indicate that if they create a work environment that encourages good food safety behavior

COMMUNICATION IS KEY TO A WORKING FOOD SAFETY CULTURE

- Management systems
- Leadership
- Communication
- Commitment
- Environment and risk awareness
- Perception and risk-taking behavior

Management commitment and worker food safety behavior were identified in the Neal, et al. (2012) study to be important factors influencing the food safety culture of a food establishment. But how do we assure this commitment and these behaviors are practiced? There are unquestionably barriers to achieving a good food safety culture. At a recent Association of Food and Drug Officials (AFDO, 2016) Conference, attendees—including industry, academia, and regulators—discussed how to improve employee health practices, including handwashing, working when ill, and good hygiene. The group was tasked with identifying challenges, solutions, and best practices.

Following is a compilation of responses from attendees at the 120th AFDO Annual Educational Conference, June 28, 2016.

and culture, foodservice operators may be able to reduce the risk of foodborne illness outbreaks."

Griffith et al. (2010) identified six indicators of a safety culture that may be applied to food safety, and even went so far as to imply that the food safety culture of an organization (or lack thereof) is a contributing risk factor that could increase the likelihood of a foodborne illness. These six identified food safety culture indicators are:

CHALLENGES

Regulatory

- Limitation in regulatory authority.
- Not updated with current FDA Food Code.
- Lack of common food code, even within a state. Lack of consistency.
- Inspection fatigue.
- 'Us vs. Them' mentality.
- Cultural gaps in understanding employees and owners.
- Language differences.
- Educate beyond a checklist.
- Partnerships or lack thereof between industry and regulatory.
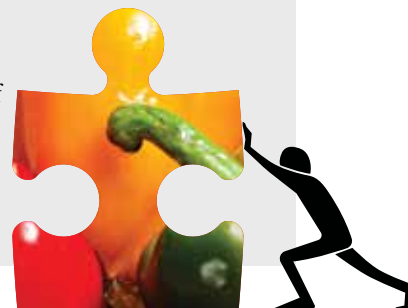
- Communication to facilities—what is public health rationale?
- Training not addressing oral cultural learners.
- Keep it simple.

Industry

- Employee turnover.
- Cultural gaps in understanding.
- Monitoring–difficulty observing employee practices.
- Training of employees.
- Lack of resources/economics.
- Conflicts between HR and food safety.
- Time restraints.
- Language differences.
- Competing priorities.
- Working when sick.
- Buy-in.
- Change culture.
- Low priority for managers.
- Communication to employees—what is public health rationale?
- Attitude.
- No CFSM (Certified Food Safety Manager) in some jurisdictions.
- Work pressure.
- Manager not "active."
- Education level.
- Empathy.
- Keep it simple.
- Lack of consistency in food regulations.
- Multiple opportunities for contamination—need to educate employees on these areas.
- Lack of policy and procedures.
- Staff shortages.
- System cross-training.
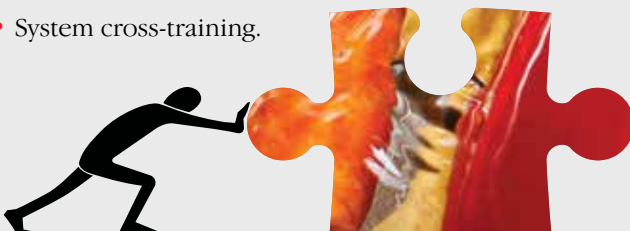
- No metric on how to measure.
- Manager does not practice.
- HIPAA/ADA. Personal medical information.
- Verbal not written for the oral learner.

SOLUTIONS

Regulatory

- Adoption of current FDA Food Code.
- Community outreach.
- Open lines of communication with industry.
- Provide resources in multiple languages, simpler, and up-to-date.
- Keep current with change in food safety culture.
- Improve methods – training for oral culture learners.
- Partner with industry associations.
- Increase awareness when inspecting.
- Top-down examples, including inspectors.
- Common vocabulary and vetting educational materials with industry. Is it understandable to their employees?
- Decision tools. Use of technology.
- Model SOP templates.
- Bridge the gap between industry and regulatory.
- Practical application of rules.
- Target managers.

Industry

- Expedite policy change.
- Educate often.
- Hire new skills.
- Open lines of communication.
- Provide resources in multiple languages.
- Address communication gaps. Manager vs front-line staff.
- Paid sick leave.
- Sound uniform policy.
- Business analysis and trends.

- Top-down examples.
- Food Safety Advisory Board/Committee.
- Recognition program—positive reinforcement.
- Opportunity to make up the time.
- Employee health agreement.
- Financial incentives.
- Educate young children.
- Make part of employee evaluation.
- X number of days accident free.
- Non-adversarial.
- Real life stories.
- Newsletter, website, fact sheet, pay stub stuffer.
- Constant follow up with consequences for non-compliance.
- Highlight FDA Employee Hygiene Handbook.

Howells et al. (2008) conducted a focus group of foodservice workers to determine the barriers that have been linked to handwashing and other food handling practices such as time/temperature control, personal hygiene, and cross-contamination in restaurants. Interestingly enough, they are similar to the challenges identified by the AFDO attendees, most of whom were high level managers for foodservice facilities across the country. The following barriers were identified by workers in the Howells (2008) study:

- Time constraints
- Inadequate training
- Inconvenience
- Not enough resources

There is no doubt that food safety education is an important element in reducing foodborne illness risk factors. Studies have found that having a Certified Food Manager (someone who has taken and passed a recognized food safety course) definitely reduces risk in a facility. That being said, even though a manager is knowledgeable about food safety and therefore their employees ideally have better food handling knowledge, instituting mandatory training for all food handlers is not consistently associated with improved employee behavior (Pillings, 2008). Food safety culture, however,

concentrates on proper food handling practices as a way of doing business, or "this is how we do things," with a goal of generating a behavior-based food safety compliance system with contributions from employees at all levels. Simply because someone is trained or knowledgeable does not mean that they will practice the behaviors they were taught. Similarly, managers must practice what they preach and regulatory agencies must reinforce these practices in an easily understood and consistent manner. This is where a strong food safety culture has its roots.

The AFDO workgroup identified several best practices that include suggestions for both industry and regulators.

BEST PRACTICES

- Common Food Code across the country.
- Templates, model standard operating procedures (SOPs), training materials that are up-to-date with the current Food Code, simple to understand and in multiple languages. Use of technology.
- "Red Folder" approach. Regulatory agency has a red folder holding all Employee Health materials that is handed out to managers on inspection of facilities with poor practices.
- Community outreach. Industry and regulatory reach out to the next generation regarding employee health issues. Example: School visits.
- Commitment of management to set the example.
- Create Food Safety Advisory Committees locally.
- Educate often and in simple and understandable ways, keeping in mind the learner.

HOW ABOUT YOU?

Do you have a good food safety culture in your facility? Do all of your employees, including management, have a "this is how we do it" attitude? Or do you perform certain tasks simply because the regulations and training materials tell you to? If you are unsure, take some time to evaluate your facility and the behaviors of your employees. If employees are part of a strong organizational culture of food safety, they will learn and practice good behaviors simply because "this is the way we do things" at our facility. Continued education and training will reinforce these behaviors instead of working to create them.

Promote a food safety culture in your facility and you will reduce the risk of foodborne illness. **E**

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Review Questions

FOOD PROTECTION CONNECTION

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1. A food safety culture is:
   A. Workers who are ethnically identical
   B. Workers who all speak the same language
   C. How food safety behaviors are routinely practiced and demonstrated

2. Indicators of safety culture that may be applied to food safety as a contributing risk factor to the likelihood of a foodborne illness:
   A. Management systems, leadership, communication, commitment, risk awareness, perception
   B. Management systems, leadership, communion, conversation, risk assessment, behavior management
   C. Leadership, communication, committees, risk awareness, perception

3. Workers identified several barriers to applying good food safety practices. These include:
   A. Time constraints
   B. Inconvenience
   C. Both A and B

4. One best practice identified by AFDO attendees was:
   A. Higher pay for better workers
   B. A common Food Code across all jurisdictions
   C. Routinely testing employees for knowledge

5. Important factors influencing the food safety culture of a food establishment are:
   A. Having parties after passing inspection and a day off
   B. Management behavior and employee testing
   C. Management commitment and worker food safety behavior

6. A good food safety culture should have:
   A. Contributions from all employees
   B. Only management input
   C. An annual test to assess knowledge

7. A manager must:
   A. Create a food safety culture in their food establishments
   B. Practice what they preach
   C. Both A and B

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