

FOOD SAFETY CULTURE

MAKING LEADERS RISK AWARE

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In Brief

As you develop your organization's food safety culture, you should be mindful of the existing organizational culture. You should talk about food safety in a language and using messaging that is understandable to the people in your organization and will motivate them with stories that resonate in a meaningful and actionable way. Reflect on how your organization's mission and values support your food safety goals and performance. Leaders will be more engaged in discussions about food safety when they can see the importance of food safety for advancing the organization's mission and supporting its values. Storytelling can be an effective method for communicating those messages to your leadership team. Storytelling can also help reinforce positive aspects of an organization's culture to foster awareness of risks. The leaders of your organization make decisions based on data. So, support your storytelling with data demonstrating the potential (or real) impact on the organization's bottom line, reputation, or effectiveness. Quantify the benefits of having a strong food safety culture, and the risks of not.

Key Learnings



Building food safety culture takes place within existing organizational culture and requires time and conscious effort to reach employees at all levels.



Storytelling can personalize the impacts of food safety risks and reinforce actions employees can take to minimize risk.



Communicating regularly and providing senior leaders insights from data can help inform sound decisions in support of food safety programs.



Helping employees and senior leaders recognize links between food safety, brand reputation, organization values, and customer safety is necessary for change.

Why is risk awareness relevant for food safety?

Safe food is a positive consequence of a company having successfully managed all risks to the safety of that food. When the risks have been eliminated or minimized, then the assurance of the safety of that food for human (or pet) consumption goes up exponentially. Identifying risks and managing risks therefore are especially important—for everyone in the company, regardless of job title or function.

As a food safety leader, your understanding of the risks to the safety of your food provides the very foundation upon which you can drive change in the organization to reduce those risks. You need to lead the identification and management of risks and ensure that all the organization's leaders are fully cognizant of these risks. When leaders are aware of the food safety risks, they can lead by example (an incredibly important trait to driving the company's culture). Hence, top-down leadership is just as important as bottom-up buy-in. And "top leadership" is not just the CEO, but the multitude of leaders throughout plants and on individual teams.

Understanding this dynamic is useful to you as you engage with staff throughout your organization, particularly your leaders.

How should you engage with leaders about food safety risks?

As a food safety leader (i.e., part of the FSQA function or department), you need to be able to communicate food safety risks to executive and senior leaders in other functions. These people are likely not familiar with the terms, acronyms, and subtleties that are part of the food safety vernacular. Hence, you are advised to use language, analogies, and metaphors people can relate to and respond best to.

STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE LEADERS



Storytelling

make messages personally relatable through compelling stories



Data

give leaders the relevant quantitative data to help inform decision-making



Language

frame messages in terms well understood by leaders (mission, values)





What's your organizational culture?

It is important that you recognize that your organization has a culture, and that you (and other leaders) can change and improve this culture. The existing culture has values, beliefs, and norms that are well accepted (by your employees and by your customers), that may not even be obvious. Keeping within that culture to begin with is a smart way to drive change. For example, there may be better or different food safety-related values that make sense to the company – driving toward those is a worthy goal and doing so in a language that senior leaders will best respond to is a must. An important aspiration in this regard is always taking steps to keep consumers from getting sick; that is a key principle.

Ways to move a culture forward include reinforcing established social norms in the company through storytelling and connection to values, operationalization of values, being open to feedback and suggestions from front-line employees, and building loyalty amongst your customers and your employees. For example, highly-tenured employees likely have keen risk awareness—for them, you can move beyond simple training and take advantage of their historical knowledge.

Your organization has a culture with values, beliefs, and norms which are well accepted even if they are not obvious. You can more effectively drive change by working within the existing culture.



How can you make food safety relatable and engaging?

One very effective way to manage the message in the communication of food safety risks is to use personalized storytelling. This technique has proven its worthiness across the globe. For example, the CEO of Maple Leaf Foods (a Canadian consumer packaged proteins company) used this approach in the aftermath of a *Listeria* outbreak that took the lives of 23 Canadians. Upper management hasn't changed since the outbreak, so they could easily relate to impactful stories of what it was like to live through this catastrophe. They used storytelling to partner with leaders across the business to help other, newer employees, understand risks, and get everyone aligned on decision-making.

Effective storytelling also shares the justification for taking action to “do things right” and to “do the right things.” This drives support across the company and helps fight complacency. Hence, employees start to find new and better ways to enhance food safety.



How do you get leaders to care about food safety?

Another very effective way to manage messaging is to provide data which are meaningful to the people who use it to guide their actions. For example, Wawa, Inc. (an American chain of convenience stores and gas stations) has seen its food safety and risk profile change significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is more complexity with their food offerings due to more drive-throughs, more catering, and changes in meal options. Data are being used to keep leaders in the loop on new decisions that need to be made for food safety—this is especially important for those who tend to focus more on the “business” side of operations.

These data still need to speak to business impact. That impact needs to be quantifiable to the extent possible. Doing so helps risks become very tangible, and even more so when real metrics are associated with the risks. In addition, statistical modeling can be used to estimate risk to the company from a food safety incident—sometimes the numbers are so extraordinary that the right next steps are obvious. The other useful data are those within the budget. Leadership approves operational and capital spending. How can technical and food safety risk data be used to get necessary funds and personnel to make food safety improvements?

How can you best engage employees and communicate food safety culture work?

Before engaging in change efforts, it is very important to plan what the structure will be for engagement and communication within the organization. This will pay dividends as the actions supporting change are executed. Such planning should address how to make food safety communications part of regular conversations and transparent within the organization and ensure engagement occurs in a myriad of venues open to diverse segments of the organization so that messaging penetrates throughout. For example, a meeting cadence should be defined for updating leaders on food safety risks and issues.



How should you move forward?

The best advice, from those who have traveled this path before, is not to try to do everything at once—change takes time, change takes patience, and change requires routine assessment to ensure results are as desired. This requires that you have persistence, yet a speedy progress.

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Nancy Wilson, Sr. Director of Quality Assurance, Risk Management and Safety, Wawa

Randy Huffman, PhD, Chief Food Safety and Sustainability Officer, Maple Leaf Foods

We are grateful for their contributions and for sharing their stories as we all work towards stronger, more positive food safety culture throughout the food industry.

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Disclaimer: This document summarizes discussions by participants in a webinar that took place on February 16, 2022, as well as best practices identified by participants related to organizational and food safety culture. This document reflects the views of the authors and should not be construed to represent FDA's views or policies.



Interested in learning more about cultivating a positive food safety culture?

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<https://stopfoodborneillness.org/alliance-to-stop-foodborne-illness/#toolkit-register>

View the joint FDA / Alliance Food Safety Culture Webinar Series:
<https://www.youtube.com/@alliancetostopfoodborneillness>