FOOD SAFETY CULTURE

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

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In Brief

In the eleventh and final webinar of our webinar series "Collaborating on Culture in the New Era of Smarter Food Safety," The Alliance to Stop Foodborne Illness and FDA hosted a panel of industry leaders to reflect on the current and future trends of food safety culture. In today's globalized world, fostering a mature food safety culture is essential for protecting public health and maintaining consumer trust. However, a successful approach to food safety cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all strategy; it requires a data-driven, individualized approach and cross-industry collaboration. Ultimately, companies must learn from others' successes as well as mistakes, engage in ongoing analysis of their own practices and engage all supply chain partners to maintain high standards at every level of production. Food safety culture is a journey, and while each company's path is unique, working together is the surest way of advancing our shared goal of producing safer food for consumers everywhere.

Key Learnings

Food safety culture is a journey unique to each company

Storytelling is a powerful tool which can be used to individualize and connect with targeted food safety audiences

Food safety culture can be measured through validated tools and performance indicators and should be done to continuously to drive ongoing improvement

Companies can learn from the successes as well as mistakes of others to improve their own best practices

In an increasingly globalized food supply, collaboration and knowledge-sharing are key to creating safer food

Introduction

Twenty years ago, "food safety culture" was not part of our professional vernacular. Today, it is a topic of discussion and study, with entire organizations dedicated to helping others measure, foster and improve their company culture. While every company has a food safety culture, not every culture is positive, mature, or intentional. Through ten previous webinars, the Alliance to Stop Foodborne Illness and FDA sought to explore specific aspects of food safety culture, covering topics such as making leaders risk aware, fostering food safety champions and developing effective reward and recognition programs.

For our eleventh and final webinar of "Series One," six leaders from across the industry were invited to reflect on their unique journeys as food safety professionals. Their experiences are as diverse and wide-ranging as the food industry itself and speak to both the present and future trends in food safety.

Note: The following serves as a reflection on the previous discussions in "Series One".
For a more in-depth exploration of the topics discussed, we encourage you to reference the earlier whitepapers in the series, <u>available for free on the Alliance website</u>.

Make Food Safety Personal

Food safety culture tools must be individualized for optimum impact. There is no "one-size-fits-all" resource when it comes to promoting food safety culture, and each company will encounter its own challenges. For instance, it may be difficult for audiences who do not work directly with food, or suppliers or co-manufacturers who do not produce a final, brand name product, to fully comprehend how their actions (or inactions) can negatively affect food safety. As Karen McCarty, Senior Director of Commercial Quality Assurance for Agropur explains, there are different approaches to be taken with "B2C" audiences (who have a direct relationship with consumers) and the "B2B" ingredients space (where audiences do not directly market to or interact with prospective consumers).

Regardless of a company's size or sector, changing entrenched behaviors is difficult. The solution lies in making food safety relevant by speaking to the specific needs, strengths, and operations of a given organization.

Audience connection may be amplified by sharing personal experiences to connect with team members. Jorge Hernandez – the Vice President of Quality Assurance at The Wendy's Company – strongly advocates for industry leaders to capitalize on storytelling as a way to convey food safety values. Storytelling can be an excellent tool to connect with an audience on a more personal level and provide the "why" behind food safety practices.

Embrace a Data-Driven Approach

For some, knowing how to measure food safety culture can feel confusing or ambiguous. However, Cultivate SA Principal Lone Jespersen stressed the importance of using validated tools to assess the maturity of food safety practices. Tracking KPIs, such as GMP violations or the frequency of safety audits, can help identify gaps and drive continuous improvement.

Companies should also avoid a "checkbox" mentality. One of the biggest challenges in food safety culture is the reduction of complex efforts into compliance exercises. As Jespersen remarked, "We risk doing to food safety culture what we did to HACCP—turning it into a compliance issue instead of focusing on making safe food." Instead, the goal should be creating a system where employees at all levels are empowered to take ownership of food safety.

No single assessment tool can change a company's culture overnight. It will require more than completing a quiz or purchasing a piece of software to determine which steps are necessary to advance your company's food safety culture. Taking time to review your organization's unique successes (e.g., What do we do well?) and sticking points (e.g., Where can we improve?) will help create a blueprint for where and how changes should be implemented.

"Don't Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste"

Although a mature food safety culture is essential to manufacturing trustworthy products, consumers are most likely unaware of your company's specific food safety practices. Megan Kenjora – Senior Food Safety Manager at The Hershey Company – emphasized that consumer-facing initiatives, such as allergen management and transparency, can help signal a company's commitment to food safety, and in turn, strengthen consumer trust.

However, because consumers generally assume that the food they purchase is safe, poor practices at one company can damage the consumer's faith in that entire category of food. For instance, a recall of E. coli tainted lettuce from one producer can make customers wary of buying leafy greens at all. This highlights the inherent connectedness of the food industry, and the importance of supporting – and learning from – your partners and even competitors.

As Jorge Hernandez says: "Don't let a good crisis go to waste." There is always an opportunity to grow or reflect when something goes wrong, even if that event does not directly impact your organization. Staying abreast of current events and learning from others' mistakes is key. Just as it is important to avoid a "check-the-box" mentality, companies should also avoid seeing their food safety practices as static. New regulations, technologies, and the inevitable turnover of employees means that things are always changing and require an ongoing assessment of best practices. Because of the integrated nature of the food supply chain, companies must maintain high standards not only for themselves, but for all of their partners and suppliers.

Collaboration is Key

All panelists agreed that the number one thing they foresaw in a safer food supply was collaboration. Enhancing food safety necessitates a collaborative approach both within and between individual companies, and as food supply chains become increasingly global, ensuring food safety requires international collaboration. Collaboration sparks positive growth and mutual learning within and across companies. Resources like the Alliance and FDA Webinar series and the Alliance Food Safety Culture Toolkit are designed to promote dialogue and encourage companies to share best practices with one other.

While companies may implement specific food safety measures, food safety culture requires buy-in from suppliers, manufacturers, and even regulators. As noted by Ola Afolayan – Director of Food Safety and Regulatory at Kellanova – "Food safety is not a competitive advantage, it is a shared responsibility." By engaging partners across the supply chain and viewing food safety not as a competitive edge but as a common goal, businesses can foster an environment of trust and transparency.

Lastly, corporate leadership's role as a champion of food safety is pivotal in steering a company towards sustained success. By placing food safety at the forefront of corporate priorities, companies not only mitigate risks but also build a culture of trust and reliability.

Acknowledgments

Disclaimer: This document summarizes discussions by participants in a webinar that took place on May, 9, 2024, 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.

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https://stopfoodborneillness.org/food-safety-culture-toolkit/

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