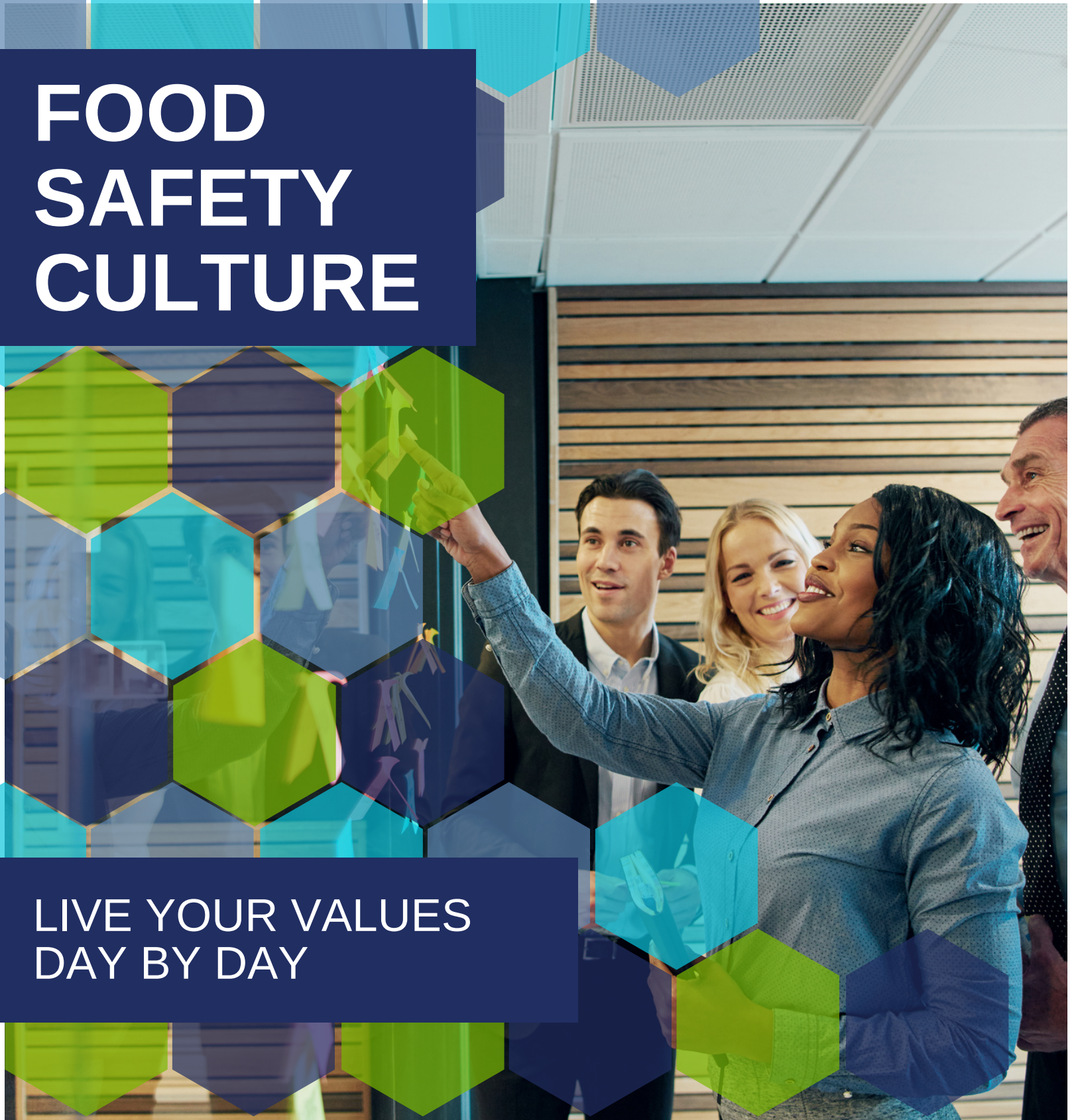


FOOD SAFETY CULTURE



LIVE YOUR VALUES
DAY BY DAY

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In Brief

Stated company values are most impactful when they are actively reinforced through everyday behaviors. Because individual employees bring their own cultural and professional experiences to the workplace, the same corporate value may be interpreted in multiple ways. As such, leaders play a crucial role in clarifying expectations, modeling desired behaviors, and creating systems that reward actions aligned with company values, one of which, for any food company, needs to be attention to food safety and quality. Practical strategies such as visual communications, recognition of strong performance, and clear prioritization of values can help employees understand how to apply these principles in their daily work. Equally important are shared experiences that strengthen relationships and reinforce a collective sense of responsibility. By consistently reinforcing core values through communication, recognition, and teamwork, organizations can build a stronger culture where employees at every level feel empowered to uphold organizational values.

Key Learnings



Values must be embodied through behavior and action.



Different people may interpret the same values in different ways depending on their social and cultural upbringing.



Shared social experiences and community-building activities can reinforce company values and strengthen trust among employees.



Leaders play a critical role in modeling values through recognition and communication.



Clear prioritization of values helps employees navigate competing pressures and make decisions that align with organizational goals.

Understanding Values

Every individual has a series of values, even if they are not consciously aware of them. Companies also have values, which may be stated explicitly in a “values and vision” statement or other formal documents, or implicitly, through expected behaviors or modes of conduct. Values do not exist simply by stating them. They must be demonstrated every day in the actions of employees. Because each of us comes to the table with our own unique life experiences, we are naturally going to have slightly different interpretations of what a stated value means to us personally. Conflict can arise when there is cognitive dissonance between an organization’s values and the individual’s interpretation of how that value should be performed, or the weight or credence of that value.

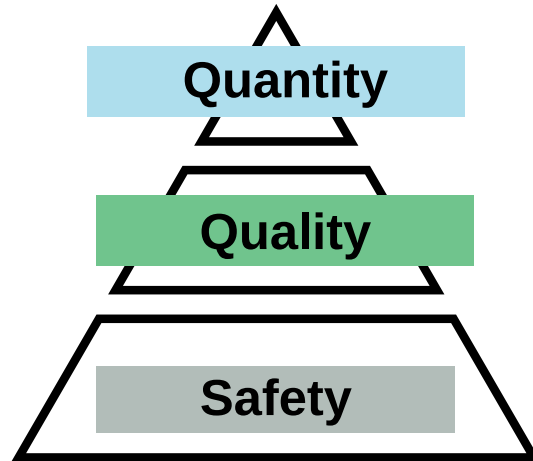
For instance, Danish-born **Lone Jespersen** was accustomed to a European culture where direct, to-the-point communication was very common. To her, directness was a way of expressing professionalism by not wasting her colleagues’ time and proactively identifying problems as they arose. However, upon moving to Canada, a supervisor pointed out that her tendency to fixate on problems, rather than successes, was resulting in a perception of negativity. She asked Lone to keep a tally of how frequently she offered a compliment, and how often she offered criticism. This conscious recognition helped Lone be more conscious of how she communicated with her colleagues, thus finding a balance between celebration of small successes, as well as constructive criticism for continued improvement.

Values in Action

There may also be an assumption that certain values are “neutral” and can only be interpreted in one way. However, even a seemingly straightforward value can take different forms depending on other cues from the larger company culture.

For example, **integrity** can be understood as doing the right thing, even when no one is watching. But what is the “right thing”? In a company where frontline workers are rewarded for speed, employees might understand integrity to be about working quickly, no matter what. In another company where workers are rewarded for stopping the line or identifying a potential hazard, integrity can be a framework for putting safety first, even if it means slowing things down.

For **Sarah Nayani** and her team of at-sea fish processors at Arctic Storm Management, their stated values of **Safety**, **Quality**, and **Quantity** are hierarchical. Each value builds on the next, meaning that first and foremost, all products must be safe. Then they must be high-quality. And of course, they are committed to producing the largest quantity possible (but only under conditions where it can be safe and delicious.) This “stacked” value structure helps employees prioritize potentially conflicting priorities.



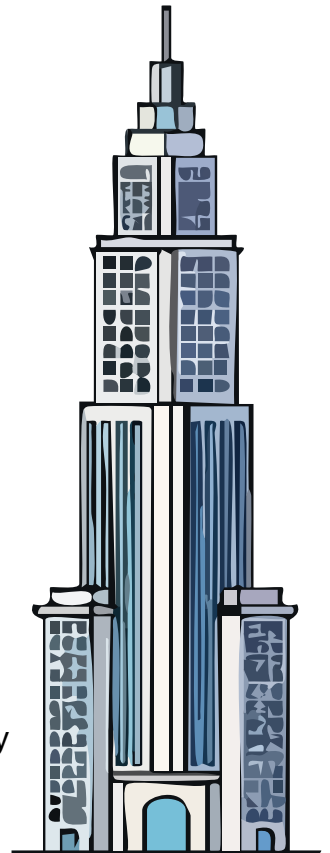
Reinforcing Values: Recognition and Communication

Intentional communication can help positively reinforce company values. For companies with multi-lingual workforces, communications with graphics and little or no text can be quickly scanned and understood by all employees.

Photographs that show the familiar faces of staff (perhaps donning personal protective equipment (PPE) or executing common protocols) help build a sense of community, while also modeling the desired behaviors.

Because relationships are a key aspect of value reinforcement, **Sean Leighton** of Cargill has taken to sending simple “thank you” emails to employees he notices doing excellent work, and CC-ing their managers. Taking even a few minutes to call out a success is a simple, effective means of celebrating an employee who is embodying the Cargill spirit.

Company values can be compared to a skyscraper: only by having a strong foundation can you create something that stands tall. However, part of that strength comes from trying different tactics to learn what works. Sean admits that some of his strategies have been less successful. He encourages leaders to embrace variety and not expect every approach to work right away (or at all!). Trial and error are essential to long-term success.



Hiring and Coaching for Values Alignment

It is important to keep in mind that an organization is unlikely to fundamentally change an individual's values. While managers should embrace opportunities to clarify expectations on how certain values are expected to be upheld, blatant acts of deception, manipulation, or inappropriate conduct should not be tolerated. If an individual displays a fundamental lack of alignment with core values, that may simply not be a good organizational culture fit. If a manager notices concerning or inconsistent behaviors, they should respectfully share these concerns as soon as possible. It is easier (and kinder) to correct a behavior immediately, rather than waiting or letting resentments pile up.

Values translate most clearly when they are embodied as a team. At Arctic Storm, the entire crew regularly shares meals, including the occasional “cook off” where local food trucks are brought in to prepare their own fresh-caught fish. As the supplier of the fish used for McDonald's Filet-O-Fish sandwiches, they even challenged employees to see who could eat the most fish sandwiches during 46 days, coinciding with Lent. These fun and playful challenges reinforce the company values of safety and quality while also building camaraderie and trust among employees. When a company normalizes eating the food they produce, it reminds employees that their products go directly into the homes and fridges of children and families.

Conclusion

Ultimately, values won't be effective or embodied if they are just stated in a document or on a website. Truly “living your values” demands consistent and intentional action from both leaders and employees. Even seemingly simple and commonplace values such as integrity, safety, and quality can be interpreted in a variety of ways, as each individual comes to the table with a unique background, culture, and life experiences that will color the way they see the world. Leaders play a critical role in helping to clarify expectations, modeling desired behaviors, and creating systems that recognize actions aligned with these values.

Small but meaningful, consistent practices can help translate abstract values into lived realities. Taking even a few minutes to send a complimentary email, share a meal, or clarify expectations can make a world of difference. While not every strategy will succeed immediately, a willingness to experiment is essential to maintaining value alignment. Ultimately, a strong food safety culture emerges when individuals at every level consciously embody company values day by day, building the trust, accountability, and shared purpose necessary for long term success.

Acknowledgments

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On February 18, 2026, the Alliance and FDA co-hosted a webinar as part of a series on food safety culture. The webinar greatly informed this paper and included the following presenters:

- **Sarah Nayani**, Director of Compliance and WestCoast Operations, Arctic Storm Management Group
- **Sean Leighton**, Senior Vice President of Food Safety, Quality and Regulatory, Cargill

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.

We also thank the following experts for their contributions to the webinar series and white papers:

- **Sam Alcaine** (IDFA)
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- **Gillian Kelleher** (Kelleher Consultants)
- **Kelly Lombardo** (Stop Foodborne Illness)
- **Christopher Waldrop** (FDA)

Disclaimer: This document summarizes discussions by participants in the webinar dated above, 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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