

FOOD SAFETY CULTURE

UNDERSTANDING ARTIFACTS

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In Brief

Food safety culture is shaped by the artifacts that employees see and interact with every day. Artifacts can be defined as the **“visible and tangible elements of workplace culture”** and serve as powerful tools for reinforcing food safety expectations, values, and behaviors. Examples include posters and bulletin boards or written policies and procedures. However, artifacts alone are not enough. To be effective, they must be regularly refreshed and supported by meaningful engagement with employees and connected to the deeper layers of culture (see [Schein Model](#) on following page). Organizations should select artifacts that align with their level of cultural maturity. Whether through simple visual reminders, peer recognition programs, or compelling storytelling, artifacts help make food safety visible and memorable. When combined with education and leadership support, they can help transform food safety behaviors into habits that become second nature across the organization.

Key Learnings



Artifacts are the visible and tangible expressions of culture, such as posters, signs, and written policies.



Effective artifacts should align with an organization’s level of food safety culture maturity and evolve alongside the organization.



Recognition and positive reinforcement may impact food safety expectations more effectively than fear-based approaches.



Artifacts are most impactful when they make food safety relevant to employees’ daily work.



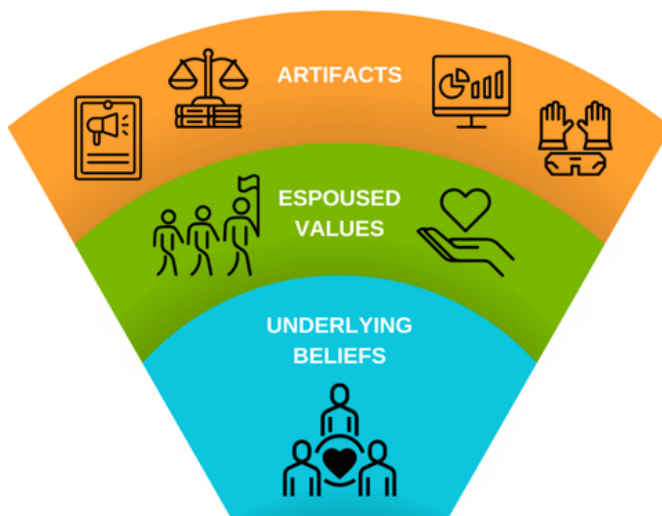
Because artifacts alone cannot sustain culture, it is important to invest in direct, ongoing engagement with employees for long-term success.

Understanding Artifacts

When discussing food safety culture, it can be tempting to focus exclusively on beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. However, culture is also reflected in the things employees can see and interact with every day. These visible manifestations of culture are often referred to as artifacts, akin to the centuries-old items found at an archeological dig.

According to **Lone Jespersen**, founder of Cultivate SA, artifacts can take many forms. Some are physical objects, such as posters, bulletin boards, signage, or visual reminders displayed throughout a facility. Others are more formalized, including written policies, standard operating procedures (SOPs), training materials, and documented expectations. Together, these artifacts communicate what an organization values and what behaviors are expected of employees.

Importantly, artifacts should not be confused with simple decorations or compliance exercises. Hanging a poster on a wall may be easy, but creating meaningful change requires far more than visual reminders alone. When thoughtfully designed and regularly reinforced, artifacts can make expectations clearer, reinforce desired behaviors, and help employees understand their role in protecting consumers.



Above: Edgar Schein's organizational culture model

Matching Artifacts to Organizational Maturity

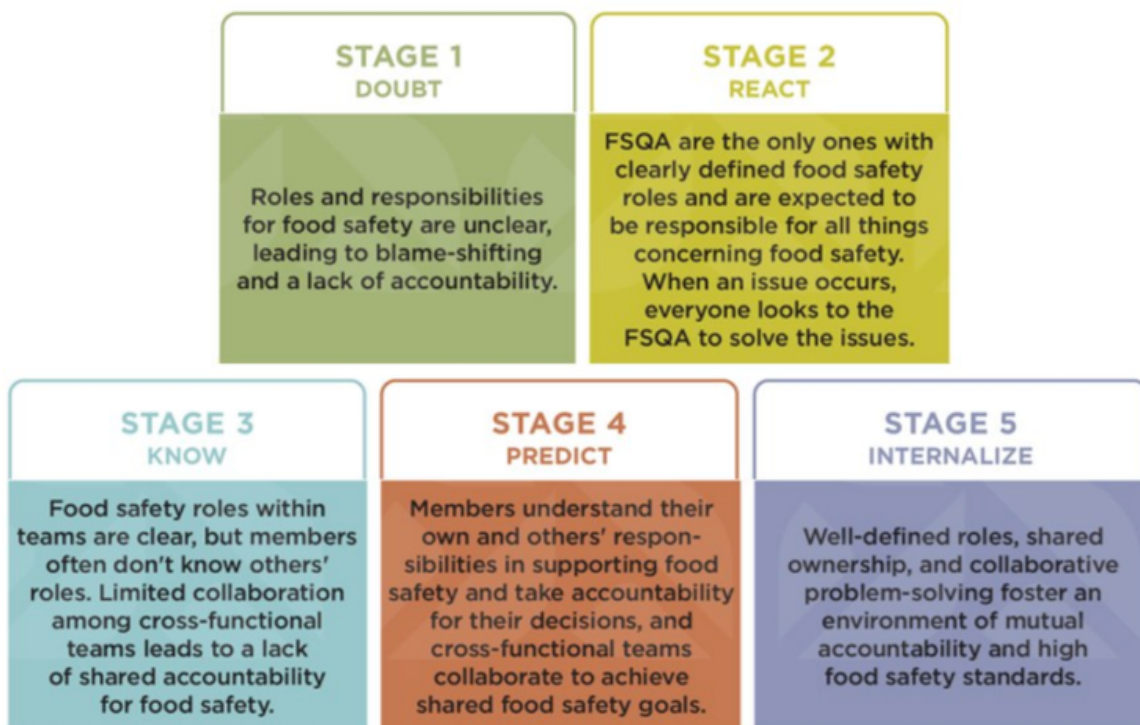
Not every organization needs the same artifacts, nor will every artifact be equally effective in every environment. Jespersen emphasizes the importance of understanding an organization's level of food safety culture maturity when deciding where to focus efforts.

Organizations in the early stages of culture development may benefit most from foundational artifacts such as controlled policies, documented procedures, and clearly communicated expectations. These tools establish consistency and help ensure employees understand basic requirements. More mature organizations may be ready to focus on more sophisticated artifacts, such as peer-to-peer storytelling, employee-led communication initiatives, or team-driven recognition systems. These approaches encourage greater ownership and participation, helping employees become active contributors to culture rather than passive recipients of information.

This maturity-based approach reinforces an important principle: organizations must meet themselves where they are. Rather than attempting to implement every possible initiative at once, leaders should identify the artifacts that are most relevant and impactful for their current stage of development.

Regardless of company size, creating a strong culture requires intentional investment. While food safety culture initiatives do not necessarily require large budgets, they do require resources. Organizations must be willing to invest time, attention, and funding toward the tools, people, and systems necessary to maintain and strengthen their culture over time.

Ultimately, the goal is to create behaviors that become so ingrained they feel automatic. Jespersen compares this to putting on a seatbelt. Most of us do not consciously debate whether we should buckle up, rather the behavior has become habitual. Strong food safety cultures seek to achieve the same outcome, making safe behaviors intuitive and second nature.



Above: Food Safety Culture Maturity Model (Courtesy of Cultivate SA)

Rituals, Recognition, and Reinforcement

Ronald Burke, Senior Director of Food, Quality & Regulatory at Ardent Mills, shared how his organization uses recurring rituals to keep food safety at the forefront of employees' minds. At the beginning of meetings, teams routinely discuss any potential food safety risks or hazards that may be present. These discussions might include facility-related concerns such as construction activity or contractor presence, as well as seasonal risks like norovirus outbreaks that warrant increased attention to handwashing and hygiene practices.

Burke also highlighted the importance of recognition. Ardent Mills has shifted toward a more positive approach centered on celebrating success. Employees are recognized for speaking up, identifying risks, and demonstrating exemplary food safety behaviors. In his experience, excessive focus on punishment can create fear-based environments where employees hesitate to report concerns or admit mistakes. By contrast, recognition-based systems help employees feel respected and valued. When individuals know their efforts will be acknowledged, they are often more motivated to engage actively in food safety initiatives.

Making Food Safety Personal

While policies and procedures provide structure, emotional connection often provides motivation. **Janeen Richey**, Food Safety Manager at Beech-Nut Nutrition, described how her organization intentionally uses imagery to help employees feel connected to their consumers. As a company that has produced baby food for more than a century, Beech-Nut frequently incorporates photographs of real babies and toddlers (often the children, grandchildren, or nieces and nephews of employees) into presentations, posters, and communications materials. By placing these little faces alongside food safety messages, employees can more easily connect their daily tasks to meaningful outcomes.

Simple actions such as checking pH levels, following sanitation procedures, washing hands, or wearing personal protective equipment can be reframed through the lens of protecting children and families. This helps employees understand not only what they are doing, but why it matters.



Keeping Artifacts Fresh and Relevant

One of the greatest challenges facing any communication initiative is stagnation. Even the most thoughtful artifact will lose impact if employees see it repeatedly without variation or interaction.

To address this challenge, Beech-Nut relies on simple, repeatable templates that can be refreshed with new content over time. Quarterly themes and monthly focus topics provide structure while allowing flexibility. These themes are reflected across multiple channels, including newsletters, social media, facility signage, and internal communications.

Richey also emphasized the value of cross-functional collaboration. Marketing and communications teams can play an important role in amplifying food safety messages and creating engaging content. Even organizations without dedicated marketing departments can benefit from partnerships with Human Resources, Environmental Health and Safety (EHS), or other internal teams.

Perhaps most importantly, organizations must remain curious and responsive to employee feedback. Artifacts should not be created in isolation. Leaders should actively engage with frontline employees to understand what topics matter most and what information employees would like to see more frequently.

Knowing the audience is critical. Messages should be delivered using language, imagery, and examples that resonate with the people receiving them. Overly technical language, scientific jargon, or complex explanations may unintentionally cause employees to disengage. The most effective artifacts are often the simplest and most relatable.



Often, the most effective artifacts use simple images that can be quickly understood by all employees, including those who speak different languages.

Conclusion

Artifacts are among the most visible indicators of food safety culture, but their value extends far beyond posters, policies, or presentations. When thoughtfully designed and intentionally maintained, artifacts help translate organizational values into everyday behaviors. They make expectations visible, reinforce key messages, and create opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Whether through written procedures, recurring meeting rituals, peer recognition programs, compelling storytelling, or visual reminders of the consumers being protected, artifacts help bring food safety culture to life. However, they are most effective when paired with ongoing education, employee involvement, and leadership commitment.



Organizations of every size can benefit from using artifacts to strengthen their culture. Success does not require expensive campaigns or large communications teams. Often, small and consistent actions can have the greatest impact. By selecting artifacts that align with organizational maturity, keeping messages fresh and relevant, and continuously engaging employees in the process, organizations can create environments where food safety becomes a shared responsibility and a deeply embedded habit that guides everyday decision-making.

Acknowledgments

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On June 3, 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:

- **Janeen Richey**, Food Safety Manager, Beech-Nut Nutrition Company
- **Ronald Burke**, Sr. Director of Food, Quality & Regulatory, Ardent Mills

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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- **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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