



Creating a thriving food safety culture

Dr. Amy Proulx

In the summer, I had the opportunity to work with the Safe Food for Growth (SAFEGRO) program in Vietnam. This Global Affairs Canada-funded project aims to improve Vietnamese's access to safe food products. Food inspectors attended an advanced workshop on food safety skills and HACCP program design and evaluation. At the program, participants often spoke of hearing about 'food safety culture' but weren't sure what it meant and how to turn it into action.

Culture doesn't happen magically, and it doesn't come from repeating a buzzword. It takes deliberate steps to create and maintain.

Most HACCP-based food safety management codes require leadership commitment statements. This is a letter or document from business owners that states the company is committed to fulfilling food safety management requirements. Does company leadership create clear policies and procedures? Does the leadership provide financial resources, allocate time for food safety in production, and ensure employees are empowered to demonstrate their own food safety skills. I've also seen managements taking that commitment seriously and making it visible to everyone visiting the facility through a poster near the entrance. In one facility, all employees reviewed and signed the poster too, thereby demonstrating their commitment. This way, there's a clear and unified purpose for everyone.

Additionally, a food safety culture requires training and employee engagement. Companies must ensure there is relevant training for each employee group, at the right skill

level, and targeted to the job they need to accomplish. Setting clear lines of accountability helps. It is essential employees know who is responsible to fix specific problems, as they arise.

Share the message

Communication about food safety is also critical. This means all employees get the



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messages, not just select managers. This may require creative tactics. The message must resonate with employees. Consider: Is it in the right language? Is the message simple and easy to apply, or is it technical and complicated and prone to be forgotten?

Helping employees understand where hazards come from, and applying a risk reduction approach is a key message. Most food manufacturing employees do not have a technical microbiology or food engineering background, so keeping messaging simple and focused on identification and elimination of hazards is the most effective strategy.

Some of the most lucrative aspects of food safety culture focus on how leadership responds to workplace behaviours and fosters positive continuous improvement. When corrective action

is required, does leadership focus on blaming people instead of fixing the problem with immediate corrective steps and long-term preventive action? Often in our reactionary way, we point fingers at each other rather than addressing the root causes of the problem.

When people work with fear and shame, they are more likely to hide a problem, and this can be catastrophic to food safety. If people can raise an issue and have a positive and proactive response from management, it gives employees the confidence to solve problems and reduce risk. Celebrating the people who identify and solve problems at all levels of the organization helps build confidence across the whole company.

When starting something new in an organization, there are often people who doubt, and resist change. There may also be advocates or champions for the change mindset. Whenever there is a change, it is important to implement it in gradual steps, as most organizations will have a range of mindsets.

One of my favourite toolkits for performing a review of food safety culture comes from Dr. Lone Jespersen. Her organization, Cultivate, has templates and models that can be used by companies to reflect on the food safety culture within their organization. The Cultivate Maturity Model (visit <https://www.cultivatefoodsafety.com/our-models>) is one of my favourite free tools. Owners can use this Cultivate tool, identify one of the elements in the model, and work to progress the value towards an increased food safety culture.

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