



Culture and its impact on the modern food business

Words by Deon Mahoney

Over the past 20 years much has been written about the concept of food safety culture and its role in producing safe and suitable food. Any scan of the food industry literature will generate a plethora of articles and papers promoting food safety culture and imploring food businesses to embrace the concept and make their food safer.

Food safety culture can be described as all the knowledge, learned values and practices that underpin hygienic behaviours in a food handling environment. With the ultimate objective being that everyone in a food business is striving for a common goal of food safety. The Global Food Safety Initiative defines food safety culture as shared values, beliefs and norms that affect mind-set and behaviour toward food safety in, across and throughout an organisation.¹

Professor Chris Griffith can be considered a leading proponent of the concept, with his observations and writings on food safety culture

starting in the 1990s. Since that time there have been various protagonists campaigning for widespread uptake of the principles. This includes publications by Frank Yiannas² and a coterie of disciples that continue to actively promote the concept.

A key approach for changing culture and embracing food safety is communication and guidance: up, down, and horizontally with all personnel in a processing facility. It commences with senior management demonstrating their commitment to producing safe food and supporting workers within the plant to understand their role and responsibilities to produce safe food.

International developments

At the present time, various aspects of food safety culture are being drafted into legislation, guidelines, and codes of hygienic practice. In 2020, the Codex Alimentarius Commission formally adopted revisions to the Codex General Principles of Food

Hygiene (CXC 1-1969) that embraced food safety culture as a general principle and included a section on management commitment to food safety.³

The European Union has recently revised the annexes to Regulation (EC) No 853/2004 on the hygiene of foodstuffs, with the goal of aligning food safety with Codex's adoption of food safety culture as a general principle.⁴ The regulation compels management and employees of food businesses to commit to safe food production and distribution. There is now an obligation on management to ensure the integrity of their food safety system, and to establish clear roles and responsibilities, facilitate effective communication, and deliver appropriate training and supervision.

While in the United States, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) launched their New Era of Smarter Food Safety in July 2020.⁵ Development of a stronger food safety culture along the food supply chain



Figure 1: Stages in the introduction of food safety culture

is a foundation pillar of this 10-year blueprint designed to enhance food safety.

In Australia the concept has been widely promoted, but there are currently no regulatory obligations to embrace food safety culture or impose specific culture requirements. This is due in part to the vague criteria, and concerns about the very subjective nature of assessing a culture. One regulatory agency is undertaking a small trial to monitor food safety compliance in the processing sector, with the focus on culture and behaviours that advance improvements in food safety. There are also developments with private certification programs, for example food businesses signed up to the BRC Global Standards must now meet the requirement that senior management define and maintain a clear plan for the development and continuing improvement of a food safety and quality culture.

Introducing food safety culture

The culture that prevails within a food business has a major impact on the efficiency and profitability of operations and the extent to which food safety is a priority. At one end of the scale are business operators that rank profit over food safety, with senior management frequently disconnected from day-to-day

operations and failing to promote food safety behaviours. At the other end are operators that focus on food safety rather than just profit and recognise the importance of individuals and human behaviour in providing safe and suitable food. Commercial and regulatory imperatives mean that most food businesses operate within these two extremes.

The way food safety culture is implemented will vary depending upon the food industry sector, the size of the business, the personnel involved, and their roles. As an initial step it is prudent to review the workplace and establish the extent to which management defines, communicates, and supports food safety goals, and the existence of processes that permit and encourage employees to share their insights with supervisors and management.

Ultimately it relies upon workers being adequately trained and empowered to follow procedures and food hygiene directives, even when not being scrutinised. For example, noticing when raw materials don't meet specifications, identifying situations where process control has lapsed, ensuring correct packaging and labelling, and adherence to cleaning and maintenance schedules. Not only does management seek good food handling behaviours, but it wants enhanced food safety

oversight, including greater vigilance by employees when things go wrong.

However, research has demonstrated that even where employees are trained in food safety, it does not always result in improved food safety practices in the workplace. Their behaviour is influenced by their beliefs and situational cues – such as the complexity of the task, social pressure to perform, and the value of a behaviour to the employee. Plus, the value of managerial corroboration of safe food behaviours is often ignored.

What have been the successes?

A major focus when introducing food safety culture is an emphasis on the relationship between employee training, food safety behaviour, and accountability for food safety. Unfortunately, over the past 20 years we have not seen a discernible decrease in cases of foodborne illness. Despite a multiplicity of food safety educational efforts, incidents involving foodborne illness and ongoing issues with undeclared allergens remain a tangible challenge for many sectors of the food industry. In the same vein, auditors are still identifying elementary non-conformances with documented food safety programs, while food recalls and withdrawals continue at or above levels occurring in recent years.

Analysis of outbreaks of foodborne illness often find a major cause is human error and failure to correctly implement a food safety program. This suggests there is a disconnect between the focus on culture and increased knowledge and the subsequent practice of good food safety behaviours.

Nevertheless, many food processors have adopted the philosophy and enjoy the benefits of having a motivated and skilled workforce that knows their role and understands their responsibilities. This is underpinned by effective policies and procedures, the provision of ongoing training, adequate resources and equipment, effective supervision, and consistent internal communication.



Factors impacting adoption of a food safety culture

When introducing the concept of food safety culture, it is essential that senior management clearly communicates the goals in order to establish and build employee belief and trust. Equally important is supporting employees such as farmworkers and personnel in packing and processing facilities to diligently follow hygienic food handling practices and proactively identify system failures.

Workers will be much more motivated to engage if they perceive all the conditions around their employment are fair and equitable. This involves treating employees with respect and dignity; paying workers a living wage; meeting minimum occupational health and safety standards in the work environment; the provision and maintenance of staff facilities; and ensuring worker grievances are properly aired and remedial action implemented where necessary.

Unfortunately, there are many impediments to changing worker behaviours and attitudes. In some sectors of the food industry there is reliance on a low-wage labour force, and an inequitable power balance between employees and employers. This is shaped by factors such as the nature of the work, physical location, gender, ethnicity, and immigration status. For example, work may be

seasonal or temporary; working conditions may be challenging e.g. cold and damp environments; tasks are often repetitive; there may be a risk of injury; or the working conditions may be perceived to be exploitative.

For many employees access to training aimed at changing behaviours is not always available and there are often limited opportunities for career advancement. Plus, employees frequently feel discouraged or disempowered to raise issues, fearing job repercussions if they do so. So, not surprisingly, getting enthusiastic about food safety is not always realistic or feasible.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, considerable emphasis has been placed on workers in the food industry practicing behaviours designed to keep themselves safe and healthy. This includes adherence to protocols around physical distancing, handwashing, and use of hand sanitisers. Self-interest resulted in workers taking up these behaviours to protect themselves, and this exercise in self-protection had the added benefit of enhancing food hygiene practices.

Ultimately success involves not only focussing on food safety culture, but rather the culture of the entire business – encompassing the way senior management operate the processing environment, the support and respect for employees and their

rights, and the commitment to food safety. This holistic approach enhances employee trust and leads to a deeper commitment to meeting food safety obligations.

Summary

Food businesses are increasingly being encouraged to improve their food safety culture as a means of enhancing product safety, with the benefits of advancing public health goals and maintaining market access. Introducing a food safety culture predictably focuses on educating employees on company policies and expectations, promoting good food hygiene behaviours, and increasing employee responsibility and accountability for managing the safety of food products.

However, any improvements in food safety will be predicated on all those factors that make up that business's culture. Sustainable improvements in food safety can only be achieved when employees feel valued, are treated fairly, and supported. For this reason, the introduction of a goal-oriented food safety culture requires comprehensive support for employees to perform their roles, the removal of barriers to pro-food safety behaviours, simplified procedures and practices, and an environment that respects workers and actively celebrates their achievements.

References

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