TIPS ON BUILDING AND MEASURING FOOD SAFETY CULTURE

If you’re in the food business, you know a strong safety culture helps you achieve one of your biggest goals: satisfied customers enjoying and sharing your product with the knowledge that it’s risk-free. However, safety culture is multi-layered, complex and ever-changing. It’s something that can be difficult to translate from theory into practice. In this white paper, Dr Bob Strong, Senior Consultant & Food Safety Expert at SAI Global, cuts through these issues and provides practical advice for understanding, evaluating and boosting food safety culture in any organization.

UNDERSTANDING FOOD SAFETY CULTURE

To evaluate and build anything in business, you first need a clear and solid understanding of the relevant subject. What are we actually talking about when we discuss food safety culture? And why is it so important?

WHAT IS FOOD SAFETY CULTURE?

Organizational culture is made up of both people and processes: the views and behaviors of everyone within an organization along with its programs, processes and policies.

Food safety culture needs to start at the top of the ‘people pyramid’. A strong commitment to safety from all levels of management is imperative in ensuring a consistent, comprehensive and responsive approach. Management must also provide leadership and guidance in this increasingly complex area.

This support from all levels of management is needed to create an engaged and safety-aware workforce focused on prioritizing consumers’ health.

A strong food safety culture is also built on the right programs, processes and policies. From manufacturing to storage, shipping and sales, these should ensure there are no compromises when it comes to safety.

WHY IS FOOD SAFETY CULTURE IMPORTANT?

A strong food safety culture is a win-win situation. Your customers enjoy a reliable, safe and quality source of food, while your organization benefits in several ways.

SAFETY AT SENIOR MANAGEMENT LEVEL

Senior management needs to be truly committed to the idea of safety first. This means senior managers must:

- Support the daily work ethic to put food safety first every single day
- Promise to provide adequate support in the form of money, people and resources to make safety first a practical reality
- Ensure there are enough employees to perform all the food safety checks in a conscientious manner
Is every employee supportive of your contributing to food safety culture: help evaluate how your employees are safety culture. Ask these questions to Employees can make or break your EMPLOYEES EMBRACING SAFETY the fear is coming from. On the other hand, an organization that audit each and every day is confident in be subject to a third-party food safety An organization that operates as if it may or fear unannounced audits? level of safety: Does management welcome management team has reached an optimal insight into whether your organization’s audit each and every day is confident in preventive controls for human foods. They should also be based on food defense training to avoid any deliberate attempts to contaminate your products; the US Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) requires organizations to have a food defense plan in place. Programs, policies and processes need to be monitored for continuous improvement and embedded within the organization by linking them to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and incentives for meeting KPIs. Incentive plans, based on reducing food safety issues like customer complaints and achieving good internal audit compliance, are another sign of better food safety culture.

PUTTING SAFETY IN PLACE WITH PROGRAMS, POLICIES AND PROCESSES
Consider each organizational program, policy and process in turn – would you describe each as proactive or reactive? A sound culture is built on proactivity. Your programs, policies and processes should also reflect what’s required today, by having somebody attend and become certified in preventive controls for human foods. Preventive controls for human foods should also be based on food defense training to avoid any deliberate attempts to contaminate your products; the US Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) requires organizations to have a food defense plan in place. Programs, policies and processes need to be monitored for continuous improvement and embedded within the organization by linking them to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and incentives for meeting KPIs. Incentive plans, based on reducing food safety issues like customer complaints and achieving good internal audit compliance, are another sign of better food safety culture.

BUILDING A BETTER FOOD SAFETY CULTURE
Building a better food safety culture isn’t simple. However, there are some key areas where, with a little effort, organizations can achieve big advances in safety.

REMOVING BARRIERS
Culture starts at the top. A lack of leadership is often the biggest barrier to improving safety culture. Improvements are especially critical where leaders are focusing on operational targets such as revenue to the detriment of safety, where they treat safety audits as a one-off activity and where the focus on safety creates a perception that staff will be scrutinized and punished. Instead, leaders should embody the ‘safety first’ message, continually monitoring safety and ensuring employees are encouraged and rewarded for playing their part.

High employee turnover can also create an ongoing cycle of poor safety culture, with organizations swimming against a tide of new and untrained staff. Addressing this issue can boost your safety and overall organizational culture.

ARE YOU JUST GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS?
You won’t see the benefits of safety culture if you’re simply going through the motions and ticking off a checklist. A true culture of safety requires engagement with the process and a desire to continuously improve across the organization. Signs that you or your employees may be just going through the motions include:

- Following rules without understanding the rationale behind food safety processes and procedures
- Consistently getting only a passing score on an audit
- Developing workarounds to avoid audits or time spent on safety measures
- Objecting to unannounced audits
- Avoiding self-audits (who wants to look for problems) and accepting the status quo
- Failing to determine root causes when problems are discovered and otherwise learn from mistakes

CONCLUSION
How are you feeling about your food safety culture after reading through these tips and this advice? Self-evaluation and reflection can be uncomfortable – especially when it comes to risk. However, it’s an area you ignore at your peril. The moment you act, you’ll be taking steps towards improvements which can return huge benefits. And that’s a reassuring feeling. Start now by jotting down the top three safety weaknesses in your organization and three steps you can take to address each weakness or start a conversation within your organization on creating a food safety culture.