SAI GLOBAL

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.

DR BOB STRONG – SENIOR CONSULTANT

Bob joined SAI Global as a Senior Consultant in AgriFood in 2013, bringing with him over 42 years of experience working in the food industry for companies such as Nestle, The Kroger Company and Steritech.

Bob's career over the last 10 years has been to use this knowledge and experience to help train and consult with many clients in both regulatory compliance and in achieving GFSI (Global Food Safety Initiative) certification. His goal has been to make client's food products better and safer so as to work towards decreasing foodborne illnesses outbreaks and deaths due to contaminated foods.

He is a sought-after trainer, speaker and conducts webinars on the ever-changing food safety requirements, both regulatory and GFSI.

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 incidents, regulatory incidents, customer complaints and recalls are time-consuming and costly. With fewer of them you can focus your resources on developing and growing a sustainable business.

Focusing on safety also protects your brand's reputation. Globalization and social media allow strong reputations built over many years to be damaged – sometimes irreparably – within minutes or hours.

A positive safety culture also builds a better overall organizational culture. As an employee, would you prefer to work for an organization that cares enough to ensure optimal safety or one that's happy to cut corners even when it means putting people in danger? Would the company's attitude affect your motivation levels? Would it affect your own commitment to safety at work?

MYTH VS REALITY: DO YOU HAVE A TRUE FOOD SAFETY CULTURE?

It's easy to talk the talk when it comes to food safety. But are you putting things into practice? It's quite another thing to walk the walk. To evaluate culture, you'll need to dig a little deeper in the following areas.

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

- Direct that no products that could cause a consumer to get sick will ever leave the facility – even if it means scratching orders
- Treat quality the same as safety so that customers and consumers get a consistently safe and high-quality product

Senior managers within a food organization should have a clear understanding of the food safety challenges faced each day across the organization. Daily walk-throughs at the facility and weekly meetings to review safety issues are a great way to achieve this understanding.

Your management team also needs the right knowledge. Consider whether they can tick off training in:

- Hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP)
- Preventive controls for human foods
- Food defense
- Good manufacturing practices (GMPs)
- Allergen controls
- Environmental monitoring

One final question can provide clear insight into whether your organization's management team has reached an optimal level of safety: Does management welcome or fear unannounced audits?

An organization that operates as if it may be subject to a third-party food safety audit each and every day is confident in its commitment to food safety culture. On the other hand, an organization that fears these audits must question where the fear is coming from.

EMPLOYEES EMBRACING SAFETY

Employees can make or break your safety culture. Ask these questions to help evaluate how your employees are contributing to food safety culture:

- Is every employee supportive of your programs, policies and procedures aimed at ensuring every product, everyday, is safe?
- Do employees prevent products that could cause a consumer to become ill from leaving the facility?
- Are employees proud to work at your company?
- Is there team spirit and a supporting culture within and across the business units?

- The taste test: Do employees eat your products without any concerns?

How do you answer these questions? Easy – ask your employees. In addition to survey methods, you can also address these questions through observation.

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. 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.

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.