

Be a Food Safety Culture Champion

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Traditional Food Safety Programs with no focus on Culture are not consistently delivering required outcomes



GFSI and Retailer Standards are now requiring evidence-based food safety culture implementation



Manufacturers are meeting this challenge with documented, assessed and benchmarked Food Safety Culture Programs

Food Safety Culture has been upheld as an essential part of making the food safety programs effective. Despite knowing this, the food industry as a whole still has cultural problems leading to catastrophic failures.

Ask yourself the following questions.

1. Are decisions that my business makes every day always in the best interest of the consumer?
2. Would your consumer agree with these decisions or, if exposed, would they choose different products?

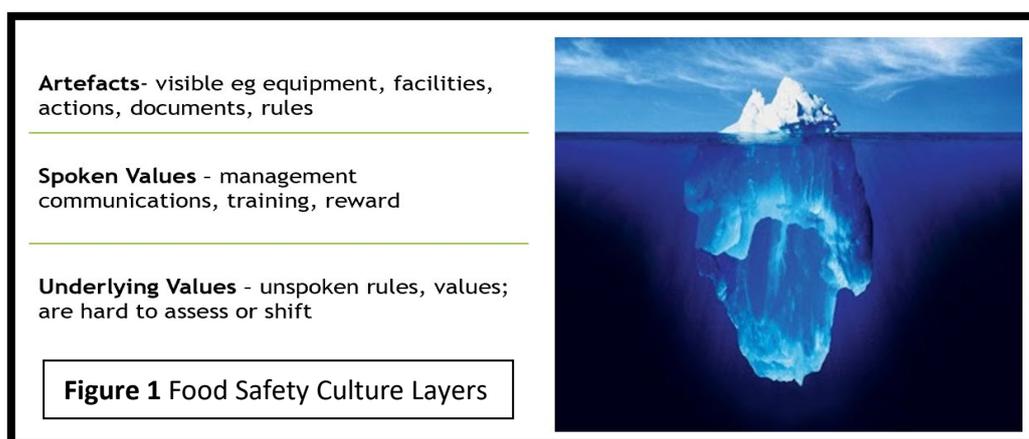
The answer is quite likely that you and your business are ok, but that can be based on assumptions and personal biases rather than facts. Culture is difficult to measure, especially for those on the inside.

Food Safety Culture 'is a patterned way of thought and behaviour that characterise a social group (in this case business), which can be learned through socialisation processes and that persist through time' (Coreil, Bryant & Henderson, 2001).

So, it is not just visible artefacts, such as plant, equipment and processes, of the business that shape culture. Culture is all about people. It includes therefore also spoken (explicit) values and underlying (implicit) values (Figure 1).



Having a strong 'Food Safety Culture is a choice' (Yiannas, 2009)



Identify the Maturity of the Business

To start influencing a positive Food Safety Culture, it is initially useful to identify the maturity of the business. There are 4 main levels of culture a business can have as shown below. Having unbiased knowledge of which category your business fits into is the first step for improving Food Safety Culture.

1. Reactive – we deal with the food safety issue if and when it is needed;
2. Committed – we have rigorous food safety processes and follow them;
3. Proactive – we are always seeking to improve food safety; or
4. Instinctive – we live and breathe food safety at all business levels.

It is a real privilege if you are working in a business with an instinctive Food Safety Culture, but if you are in a different kind of business there are many opportunities to drive change.

Unfortunately, many technically minded people understand the science of food safety very well, but generally have little exposure to organisational behaviour sciences.

6 Key Psychological Principles

You can leverage these principles to help drive a positive Food Safety Culture:

1. Commitment: Once a person made a public choice, they will want to be consistent in their actions.
2. Consistency: Once a person commits to a small request, they are more likely to agree to a larger one.
3. Discrepancy: People respond to 'identifiable' people, not large groups (i.e. companies).
4. Social Norm: Persons are more likely to follow a recommendation if similar others are already following them.
5. Similarity: Persons are more likely influenced by people who are similar to them.
6. Fun/ Emotion: People remember the feeling long after the message has been given.

7 Key Strategies to Championing Positive Culture Change

1. Getting a senior manager to publicly commit; an open business announcement carries a lot more weight than just signing off a management commitment document, even if it is posted publicly.
2. Prioritise easy wins (areas such as consistency) that require low OpEx or CapEx through which you can show the benefit to the greater business, ideally quantified in dollar terms.
3. Identify key team members in the business who can champion specific actions, for example, the manager

who always addresses foreign body risks. This has a lot more impact than a policy in a folder.

4. Senior staff are more likely to agree to recommendations if they know that other managers or businesses are doing these things already and they are therefore falling behind or are exposing themselves to risk.

5. Use internal staff in roles that are familiar to the target audience to spread the message. For example, get an operator to explain how their food safety action protected the business and also got them a reward, even if it was just a thank you.

6. You can't underestimate pride in the business or product or an enjoyable calibration session in driving change. The famous story of the NASA cleaner who believed he was there to get a man onto the moon is a prime example of how commitment to a simple task can raise the whole team.

7. Many food safety standards are now asking for Food Safety Culture reviews and change plans creating a burning platform to drive implementation.

With these insights of how people react to cultural initiatives, you can start to build momentum.

Further, a change management model such as Kotter (2014) is very useful. These generally consist of 8 steps to create the momentum to drive change, and most importantly make it stick.

1. Create a burning platform by making senior management aware of issues;
2. Build a team of willing partners that can guide the process;
3. Develop a vision that is consumer centric and easily understood;
4. Get buy-in from all levels of the business;
5. Empower people to be Food Safety Champions;
6. Create some short-term wins that generate momentum;
7. Sustain the momentum through reporting, reinforcement etc.;
8. Maintain the new status quo so that Food Safety behaviour becomes instinctive.

So here you have the basic ingredients to be a Food Safety Culture Champion and drive positive change in your business.

QAPartners can systematically implement an evidence-based Food Safety Culture Program in your business.

Our comprehensive approach covers all levels of management and staff and follows our 5-step process:

- 1) Senior management engagement
- 2) Independent benchmarking of your current food safety culture
- 3) QAPartners facilitated findings workshop
- 4) A food safety culture improvement plan
- 5) An annual review to refocus continual improvement

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