

Embedding a Powerful Food Safety Culture: Creating, Anchoring, and Sustaining Change



Having a strong food safety culture is something all F&B companies aspire to. Yet, while food safety is often touted as a critical value, behaviors on the plant floor don't always live up to these ideals. This trend isn't isolated, and it's for this reason that governing bodies like the FDA and food safety organizations like GFSI are adopting new directives around food safety culture. Establishing food safety principles isn't where the challenge lies. What does prove difficult, however, is getting beliefs and behaviors to stick. A company with a strong food safety culture is one in which the right practices are being followed even when no one is watching because the pursuit of safe food has become an intrinsic value that's inextricable from day-to-day operations. Here, we'll show you how to get there.

In the coming pages, we'll cover:

- ▶ An overview of what it means to have a strong food safety culture
- ▶ How to evolve your current food safety culture
- ▶ How to focus on the people dimension of food safety
- ▶ Actions you can take to start driving change now

We'll begin by exploring the concept of anchors and how they affect our approach to food safety.



Food Safety Culture: An Overview



Anchors & Food Safety

Anchoring refers to the adopted practices we follow every day or our psychological shortcuts. We don't have to think about putting pants on one leg at a time, for instance. There are many of these shortcuts we take every day with food safety, too. Yet, sometimes we have to challenge these anchors and ultimately lift, shift, and drop them in a new place.

When anchors go wrong, they can have disastrous consequences. A well-known example is Maple Leaf Foods, whose cold cuts were contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*. Tragically, 22 people lost their lives, while dozens of others fell ill. The food safety incident did not happen because there were no protocols in place; rather, there were anchors around food safety that had to be changed.

The 5 Stages of Food Safety Culture Maturity

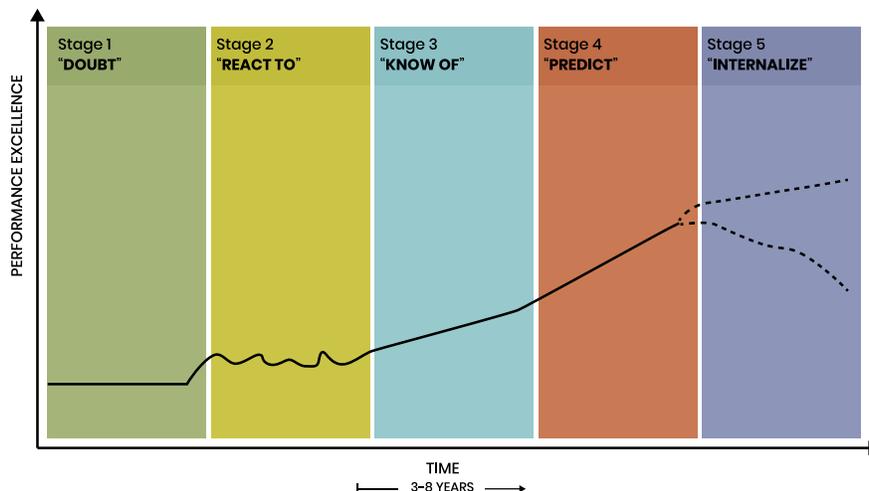
According to GFSI, “A company’s food safety culture is the shared values, norms, and beliefs that affect mindsets and behaviors toward food safety in, across, and throughout the company.”

The key words here are “shared” and “affect.” It’s in the sharing of values, norms, and beliefs within a group that culture takes place. These factors then affect how we think about things as well as how we act.

Food safety culture has shifted from simply being beneficial to being a standard requirement within certain programs. Under clause FSM 2 of GFSI requirements, “Management commitment and food safety culture,” senior management is required to maintain and implement elements of a food safety culture, which must consist of “communication, training, feedback from employees, and performance measurement on food safety-related activities” at a minimum.

This is a compelling incentive for companies to adopt a food safety culture. Still, it’s only an external motivator. In order to reach the later stages of the food safety culture maturity model, leaders should be driving conversations that get the organization out of reactive mode and into stages where food safety is promoted internally through the culture.



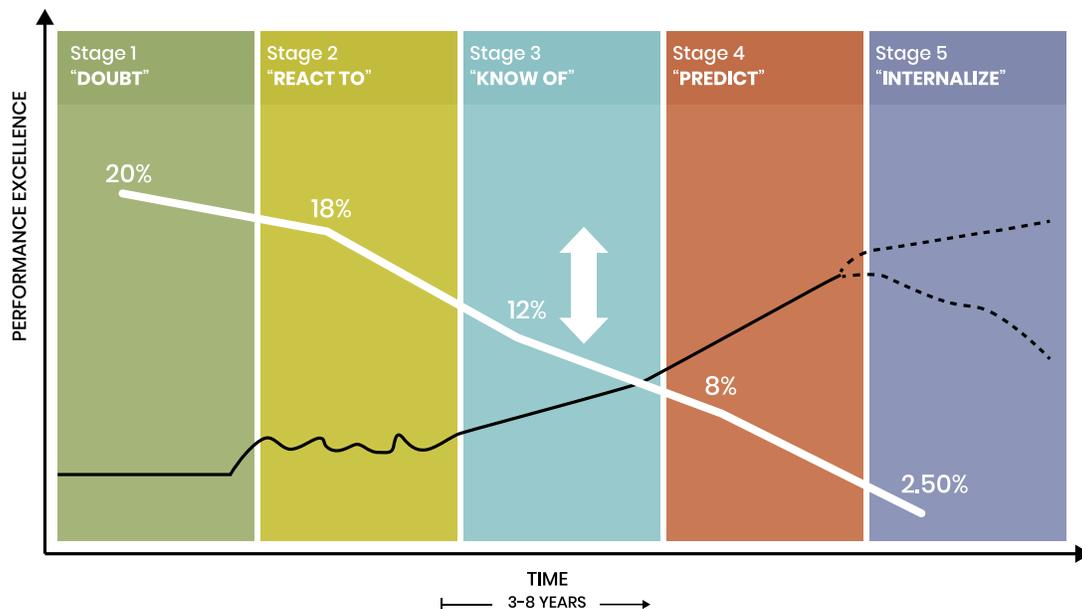


Here's a brief look at the five stages of the food safety culture maturity:

- ▶ **Stage 1:** Doubt – In this stage, actions and behaviors are motivated by internal pressures. There are no significant improvements in performance.
- ▶ **Stage 2:** React To – The company reacts to food safety threats as they are observed. There are slight improvements, but they aren't sustained and embedded in what the company is doing. There may be individuals in strong technical roles, but food safety is likely contained within one department.
- ▶ **Stage 3:** Know Of – In this stage, people in other functions, such as finance and product development, are beginning to engage in food safety. At this stage, leaders should attempt to engage them and formalize their roles in food safety.
- ▶ **Stage 4:** Predict – By stage four, food safety is included in the company strategy. The plant may use predictive analyses to stay on track with their food safety objectives.
- ▶ **Stage 5:** Internalize – Food safety has become ingrained in the organizational culture, and it is a foremost priority. This stage is considered aspirational, but even working towards it can help companies make food safety a pillar that translates to business success.

It's important to remember that moving through this maturity model takes time. A company won't be able to jump from stage 2 to stage 4 in a year, for example. Yet, when you break down improvements into manageable, simple actions, the entire organization can come with you and take ownership over food safety.

The Financial Impact of Building a Food Safety Culture



Measuring the cost of quality can help you put into perspective the importance of a food safety culture, and it can also help you progress through the maturity model. For the best results, your company should at least be in stage 3 before you start measuring the cost of quality; before then, most companies don't have the knowledge network needed to get an accurate analysis.

In some cases, you may have to increase the cost of quality slightly before you can decrease it. This is due to the fact that you'll become more efficient at spotting potential issues with food safety, which can cause costs to temporarily spike. Rest assured that it will drop even lower afterward.

Moreover, since cost of quality is a metric that can effectively capture the attention of leadership, measuring it could be an effective way to engage stakeholders.

Once you're able to gauge where you are in terms of building a food safety culture, you can then lift and shift your company anchor to drive improvements.

How to Evolve Your Food Safety Culture

While each F&B company is unique, it can be helpful to look to other companies for inspiration. One company, which started out in the early stage of maturity with a score of 2.2 (on a scale of 1-5), was able to increase its score by 19%.

Each dimension gets a slice on the wheel of maturity, and in a perfect organization, each of these dimensions would be “full” at stage 5. Of course, this is only aspirational. In our first example, the company needed to improve in the areas of vision and mission and people, and consistency would likely improve as a natural byproduct. After all, the dimensions are on a wheel, and all components influence each other.

The maturity is measured based on the five dimensions of food safety culture outlined by GFSI, which include:

- ▶ Vision and mission
- ▶ People
- ▶ Adaptability
- ▶ Consistency
- ▶ Hazards and risk awareness

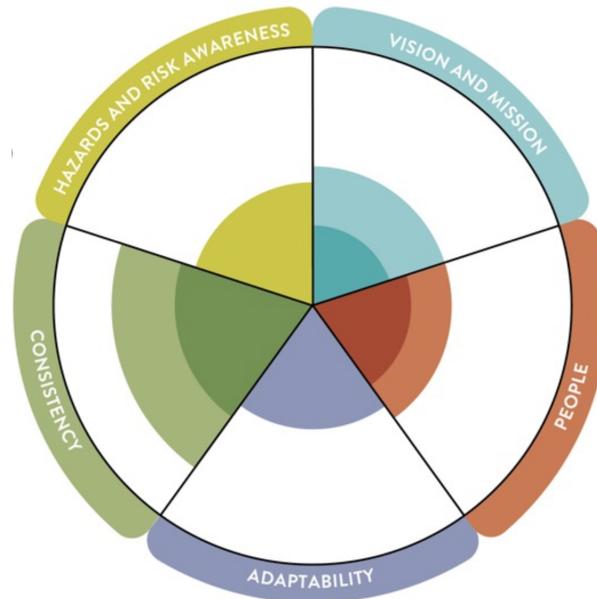
With this first example, the goal to lift and shift the anchor was to get leaders to “walk the talk” and take accountability. One core tactic they focused on, therefore, was leader education. They implemented one-page guides outlining expectations and key messages which could be taken into meetings to drive conversations with teams. Education might be on physical hazards and allergens, for example.

They also worked on establishing a rhythm and habits to better support food safety consistently. Messages would come from the CEO quarterly, from leadership monthly, from managers weekly, and from supervisors daily. This tactic was simple yet effective, especially since it could be measured as a key performance indicator (KPI).

By implementing these strategies, the company saw noteworthy progress, improving their score to 2.7 within 16 months.

Progress

Early Maturity



*Average maturity score = 2.7 (+19%)
16 months*

In the second example, a different company started out with a baseline maturity score of 3.1. They needed to drive change around hazards and risk awareness as well as people, with the goal of also improving consistency. To shift their anchor, they'd have to ensure food safety behaviors would be shared across all levels and roles. Plus, they'd need to ensure everyone affected food safety risks by participating in a near-miss program.

The company implemented a series of tactics to target specific behaviors, such as using the "carrot vs. stick" approach to use positive consequences for problem prevention. They also made risks personal with their near-miss program, which engaged people from cross-functional groups. The objective was not to simply have people go out and look for near misses only to report on them, but to actually empower them to act on issues.

As a result of these tactics, the company's score went up to 3.4 within 18 months.

As you can see, focusing on your company's greatest asset – its people – is the most effective way to support a stronger food safety culture. In the coming section, we'll take a closer look at how you can specifically nurture the people dimension.

Promoting the People Dimension



Recently, learning organizations have pivoted to adjust to unique circumstances in the aftermath of COVID-19. Currently, organizations are focused on:

- E-learning versus group-based training as technology is increasingly embraced
- Less training overall, as many companies have had to pause and address the challenges of COVID-19 first and foremost
- A change in content to prioritize social distancing protocols
- An increase in communication, including tools to observe how employees are implementing protocols and procedures around COVID-19 risks
- More reinforcement, such as signage, decals on floors, and posters
- An increase in HR involvement to ensure training is being conducted and behaviors are being followed

These changes have been implemented rapidly, as many companies have had to quickly adjust their strategies to align with the needs set forth by the pandemic. Perhaps we can learn from these examples of engendering employee health and wellness and apply them to our food safety culture efforts, too.

Specifically, learning organizations should focus on employee capability, effective training, and training reinforcement. Below, we'll discuss what each of these categories looks like in a mature versus immature culture.

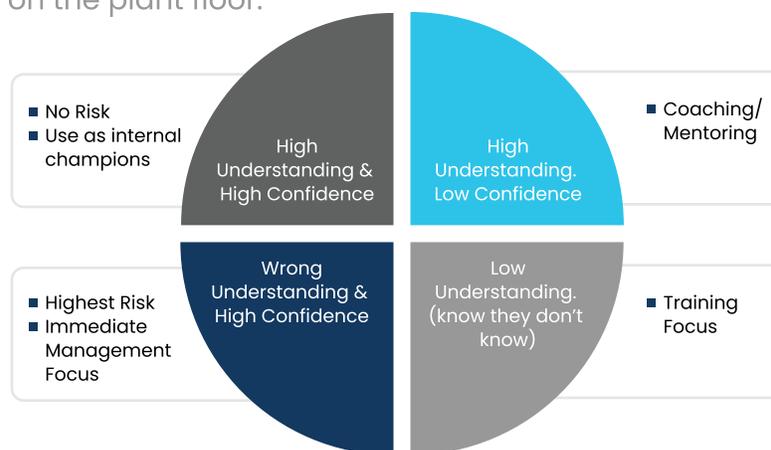
Employee Capability

In an immature culture, employee capability bears the following characteristics.

- ▶ Universal training content: There is an assumption that everyone needs to know everything, so people become inundated with extra information.
- ▶ Lack of comprehension: People rely on attendance.
- ▶ Lack of confidence: Employees are unsure of the right things to do.
- ▶ Lack of behavior evaluations: Formal classroom training is only given to check a box.

For mature cultures, on the other hand, employee capability is made up of:

- ▶ Specific training content per job role or function: Information is provided purposefully on a need-to-know basis.
- ▶ Complete comprehension: Knowledge of material is tested regularly.
- ▶ High confidence: Employees know exactly what to do.
- ▶ Documented behavior evaluations: People are observed to ensure they apply knowledge on the plant floor.



Confidence and understanding matrix. Original Source and with permission from Cognisco (www.cognisco.com)

Typically, new employees can be expected to have a low understanding and low confidence when it comes to food safety culture. More senior people may have high confidence, but a low understanding of the current best practices. The objective, therefore, is to move everyone to a place where they have a high understanding and high confidence. It's possible to get there with coaching, mentoring, and effective training, which brings us to our next point.

Effective Training

In an immature organization training program is:

- ▶ Curated exclusively by QA, with facts and figures that may be too technical to create a compelling learning experience
- ▶ Given only upon induction and on an annual basis
- ▶ Offered only in the classroom
- ▶ Overseen by QA for compliance
- ▶ Lacking metrics

In a mature organization, training becomes more effective through:

- ▶ Cross-functional development
- ▶ Routine and ongoing learning
- ▶ Blended learning (in and out of the classroom); for instance, employees might act out correct versus wrong behaviors
- ▶ Employees becoming responsible for training compliance; for example, they might be directed to complete courses independently within six months or risk termination
- ▶ Documented metrics for training effectiveness

Remember, training isn't a "one and done" activity. Simply being committed to food safety isn't the same as execution. Training must therefore be reinforced routinely.



Training Reinforcement

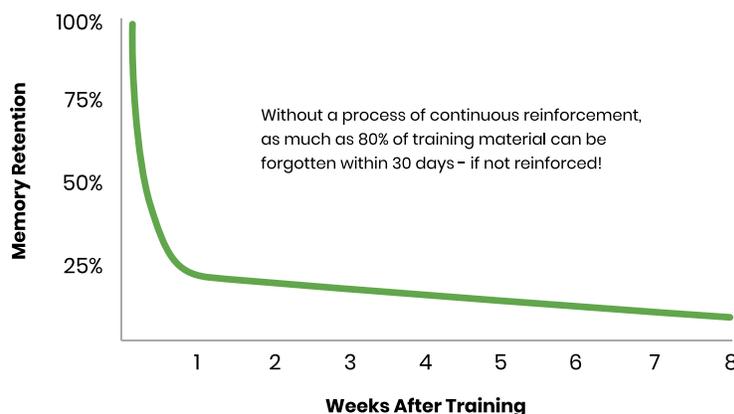
Training can check boxes, but if employees aren't practicing the behaviors that support food safety on the floor, it's simply not successful. According to a global food safety training survey, in two-thirds of organizations, there are at least some employees who don't follow food safety programs on the floor, despite efforts in food safety training. If this is happening in your company, it's important to not only perform a root cause analysis to get to the bottom of this trend, but also to ensure training is being reinforced.

Here's what reinforcement looks like in immature cultures:

- ▶ Food safety modeling is lacking
- ▶ Induction training is the sole form of training
- ▶ Only negative behaviors are addressed
- ▶ Supervisors provide corrective action instructions

Mature food cultures reinforce their training by:

- ▶ Modeling food safety at all levels
- ▶ Having ongoing food safety communications
- ▶ Addressing both negative and positive behaviors
- ▶ Supporting peer-to-peer corrective actions



According to the "Forgetting Curve" concept, as much as 80% of training material can be forgotten within 30 days if not reinforced. For this reason, reinforcement around food safety concepts is essential.

Building Culture in Companies with Low Morale and High Turnover



High turnover is an unfortunate reality for many F&B companies. For some, the average worker may only stay on for a year. Building a strong food safety culture in a company where people come and go so frequently may seem impossible, but it can be done.

First, start by identifying the small core group of people who do stay with the company. Nurture and reward these veterans, and educate them on their responsibility as role models. Empower them to speak up and embody the values of food safety through their actions.

Whether they work on the floor, in the warehouse, or as decision-makers, these employees will be working alongside others who will likely be temporary colleagues. From the minute someone new steps on the floor, the core group should act as a buddy for these new people.

Secondly, when you have high turnover, focus on simplicity and standardization. SOPs shouldn't be seven pages long for employees who are unlikely to stay more than a year, for instance. Aim for simple messaging about what to do versus what not to do to avoid overwhelming these employees, and to promote compliance with the most important food safety behaviors.

Actions You Can Take to Promote a Stronger Food Safety Culture Now

Looking at the food safety culture maturity model can be daunting, but getting started doesn't have to be complicated. Here are steps you can take right away to begin promoting a stronger culture around food safety in your company.

1. Use the GFSI Food Safety Culture position paper as a maturity checklist.
2. Identify a dimension or area for improvement.
3. Seek out best practices and/or consultants for specific tactics to use.
4. Leverage newly learned change management experiences.
5. Measure results and assess progress.
6. Repeat!

Final Thoughts

Now that food safety culture is ingrained in programs such as GFSI, it's no longer a "nice-to-have" quality, but a must-have. While most F&B companies consider food safety a priority within their culture, it's important to make sure you're also "walking the talk" when it comes to living up to your values.

Many companies have anchors that must be analyzed and shifted to evolve within the food safety maturity model. Most are in the early stages of this model, where people are aware of the importance of food safety, but it isn't yet ingrained in the company's strategy or daily actions and decisions.

Fortunately, there are several effective methods you can use to evolve your culture. Specifically, promote the people dimension by focusing on employee capability, effective training, and reinforcement. While precise strategies may look slightly different from one company to the next, this general framework is an effective way to inspire teams to take ownership of their roles in food safety. When these values are shared across everyone in the company, food safety truly does become woven into the fabric of your culture.

About the Panelists



Lone Jespersen, Ph.D., Founder and Principal at Cultivate

Dr. Jespersen is Founder & Principal of Cultivate, LLC, an organization dedicated to helping food manufacturers globally make safe, great-tasting food through cultural effectiveness. She holds a Master in Mechanical Engineering from Syd Dansk University in Denmark, a Master of Food Science from the University of Guelph in Canada, and a Ph.D. in Culture Enabled Food Safety. Dr. Jespersen served as chair of Food Safety Culture for the GFSI technical working group dedicated to characterizing and quantifying food safety culture across the global food industry from farm to fork.



Laura Dunn Nelson, VP of Business Development, Intertek Alchemy

Laura brings over 30 years of experience implementing food safety and quality control programs for processing, packaging, food service, and retail operations. She has worked with global retailers and manufacturers in the implementation of their food and workplace safety programs. Laura is a graduate of University of Texas with a Bachelor of Science in Microbiology.

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