



# **Developing a culture of food safety in your business**

The importance of food safety culture, what it is, where problems lie, assessing your business and how to bring about change.

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Organizational culture impacts everything a business does. According to Alison Doyle of [The Balance](#): “*Company culture includes a variety of elements, including work environment, company mission, value, ethics, expectations, and goals.*”<sup>[8]</sup> Food safety is part of that culture; indeed it is central in the food and drink industry, making or breaking a business.

This paper will help readers understand more about the importance of food safety culture, what it is, where problems lie, assessing your business and how to bring about change.

## What is a Company Culture?

Geoff Schaadt, a consultant and practice leader in business sustainability, says organizational culture is: “*the sum of everything that makes up the modern workplace. It is the stated values of the organization... more importantly, it is the unstated values that have never been codified—yet which every employee fully understands.*”<sup>[17]</sup> It defines what is acceptable and what isn’t, explicitly and implicitly, who and what is valued and who, or what, is not. It is its projected character that helps employees organise and understand the way things need to be done.

“*Culture is not just about how things are done. It’s about a complete encompassing of an attitude*”, says Sarah Daniels, a chartered environmental health practitioner, trainer and consultant at The Red Cat Partnership Ltd.<sup>[6]</sup> Company cultures can be strong or weak, positive or negative, with PR that reflects this. For example, Uber has recently been at the centre of a media storm, due what Mike Isaac of the [NY Times](#) described as its “*aggressive, unrestrained workplace culture*”.<sup>[16]</sup>

Where food safety is concerned, says a [Food Safety Culture report](#) produced by Checkit, “*the right type of culture is paramount.*”<sup>[6]</sup> Clearly, there are also implications beyond this too, from the Uber experience.

**Culture is significant in a number of ways for a business.** It defines right and wrong: written and unwritten rules, including marketing assets, technologies employed, procedures and guidelines, established protocols and informal processes, salaries and perks and more.



Determines how staff behave & whether they follow or undermine rules.



In turn, staff behaviour reinforces the culture.



It’s an on-going feedback loop.

## What is Food Safety Culture?

For Dr Rosemarie Pearson: *“Food safety culture is a reflection of the collective attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of all food handlers, supervisors and managers towards food safety and hygiene issues.”*

These attitudes manifest themselves visibly in workplace procedures and documentation, but are also communicated by managers to employees during training and through rewards and schemes. Values are also held at a deeper, unspoken level by employees.

The organizational food safety culture, i.e. prevailing attitudes, values and practices, then defines the quality of food safety and hygiene management. In practice there is often a mismatch between rules and regulations set by leadership and how staff apply these.

Without effective embedding of a good food safety culture at every level, including senior management monitoring and engagement, misperceptions or negligence of day-to-day staff are key drivers of food safety issues.

Food safety in organizational culture is inconsistently implemented across the food production industry. Some businesses are very clear about risk management and have effective systems, plus *“...competent leadership and staff throughout the business who recognise the importance of food safety and take their responsibilities seriously.”*<sup>[6]</sup> Others underestimate risk, cut corners and either actively deny or underplay the potential health risks, reputational damage, and business threat that food safety failings can inflict.

Schaadt differentiates two types of organizational culture to demonstrate how workers can be empowered to take more responsibility for food hygiene and safety and to point the way for how culture can be transformed: role or task based.<sup>[20]</sup>

**Role-based cultures:** In the Western food manufacturing sector, this culture has pre-dominated. Here, *“...authority, power and resources are driven by title and individual personality.”*<sup>[20]</sup> Organizational structure is pyramidal, hierarchical and bureaucratic; strategic and operational decisions are passed from the top downwards. Employees are relatively powerless to shape change.

Given they have no input in making decisions, unsurprisingly, they are not motivated to proactively solve problems, so become



disengaged and unstimulated by their work; good practice suffers when responsibility is abrogated. Workers take the attitude of: “*not my problem.*” If workers are instructed about what to do, how to do it and how much time they have to get the job done, there is little room for personal pride; workers are extensions of the machinery.

**Task-based cultures**, by contrast, are “*inclusive of everyone within the organization*”. This culture has a pro-active approach to solving problems, task management and organizational talent development. A team approach is seen as key. Respect is earned, based on a person’s expertise and professionalism. Power, status and rewards arise from group accomplishments, rather than being ascribed only to ‘heroic’ individuals. Communications and lines of reporting lines in this culture are more complex as collaboration creates greater overlap.

With regard to creating a culture change in terms of food hygiene and safety, it is clear that staff benefit from empowerment and support leadership efforts at improving practice.

### Why is Food Safety Essential to Your Business?

In 2019 it will become mandatory for businesses that serve or sell food to display their food hygiene rating [publically](#).<sup>[7]</sup>



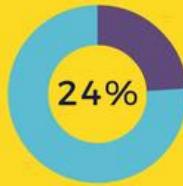
It seems 38 percent of diners are concerned about food hygiene when eating out. Allergens are also becoming an increasingly important aspect of food safety. 6 percent of people in the UK consider themselves to have a food allergy, [according to Allergy U.K. statistics](#).<sup>[1]</sup> The Food Standards Agency reports that [1 in 100 people have coeliac disease](#).<sup>[9]</sup>

The potential gains from a company culture focused on food safety are vast. Businesses who are leaders in food safety culture stand out from the rest and are given a competitive advantage, which also brings potentially huge benefits commercially.

# WHAT ARE CONSUMERS CONCERNED ABOUT?



FOOD HYGIENE  
WHEN EATING  
OUT



HORMONES,  
STERIODS &  
ANTIBIOTICS IN FOOD



FOOD  
POISONING

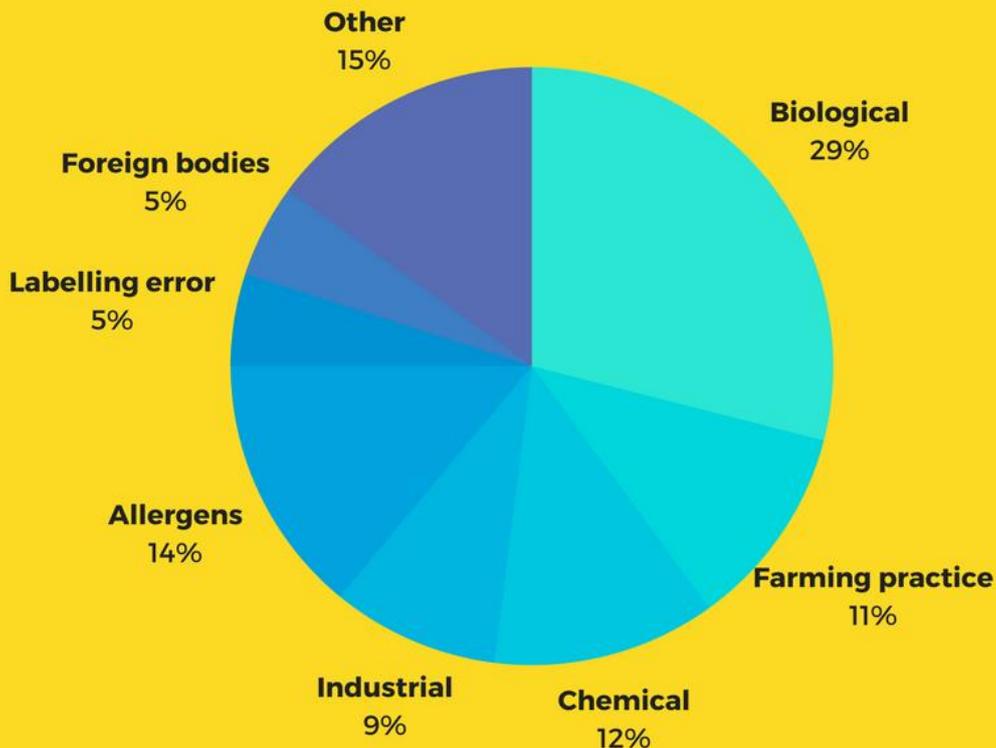
## 260,765

Food hygiene  
inspections  
completed in 2015\*

## 181,877

Formal  
enforcement  
actions in 2015

# CONTAMINATION INCIDENTS CAUSES



## The Hazards Of a Weak Food Safety Culture

Good practice stands on a strong, pro-active culture of food safety. Where it is lacking, there are likely to be high rates of customer complaints, a disinterested workforce with poor rates of pay and high absenteeism and staff turnover, as well as unhygienic conditions, with sub-standard filtration, maintenance and food quality monitoring systems. Together, these risk food contamination outbreaks which not only critically damage a company's reputation - criminal negligence claims can close a business down.



Crew comments: *“Every company should be audit-ready every day, operating in the same standards.”*<sup>[5]</sup> This level of confidence and standard of effectiveness requires a consistently high standard of practice, with up to date technology, effective systems for monitoring, plus staff who fully appreciate the significance of maximising food hygiene, and who value their role in the company. Food production is complex, so naturally, transforming any company's food hygiene culture is difficult, but, as we see from a particular case study on Sunny Delight<sup>[21]</sup>, entirely doable.

### What Poor Food Safety Culture Looks Like

- Staff at various levels are not engaged with food safety values or practice
- Lack of adequate focus on food safety risks
- Disinterested workforce, poor morale, poor attendance, high staff turnover
- Unacceptable incidence of food contamination
- Regular customer or client complaints
- Reputation damage
- Loss of custom
- Litigation
- Business losses
- Vicious spiral of decline, ultimately closure or bankruptcy.

## Best Practice In Food Safety Culture

By contrast, when a company culture focuses on food safety, it makes a company not only commercially viable, but ensures longevity and competitive advantage as a result of their strong reputation. High quality products produced by market-leaders offer reliability to customers and where food producers operate in the business to business sector, clients can be confident of their own protection as a supplier to the public.

Embracing food safety has unexpected knock on benefits for businesses prepared to see the work through and maintain high standards, but it requires engaging all your teams from the boardroom to distribution.

When staff see what business success can mean for them in terms of salaries and professional development, such as Level 2 Food Hygiene or food safety training and certification, staff retention will follow, together with improved morale which generates a virtuous circle. As staff are happier, capacity and productivity are improved, which creates greater profitability, which can then be reinvested back into the business.

Management must be prepared to work on the culture beyond mere food safety, albeit this is also a key aspect of the business. For instance, from provision of safe parking for staff, flexible working options, effective training, team project rewards and so on, a positive company culture will motivate teams to take on board food hygiene improvements and value their contribution to the overall success of the company.

### Food Safety Culture: The Virtuous Cycle of Growth and Success

- Engagement with food safety at all levels and processes
- Measures taken for identified food safety risks, preventing contamination outbreaks
- Staff feel valued and rewarded. Morale is good. Teams take pride in responsibilities.
- Staff food safety training is good. Monitoring and food quality control is effective
- Reputation is positive
- Strong, confident customer base
- Business growth

We see, then that the benefits of an effective food safety oriented corporate culture are worthwhile and contribute to excellence. So the question then arises of how to get from current standards to best practice, which offers business success.

## What Obstacles Are Stacked Against a Food Safety Culture?

Given culture is as much about perception as practice, there are unsurprisingly, both practical and psychological barriers to positive progress towards a strong food safety culture, all of which need addressing.

The Checkit and BRI Camden report identified six practical barriers to a positive food safety culture, where practical issues were as follows:

### 1. Excessive Revenue Emphasis

Revenue is a crucial for any business, of course, but the authors of the Checkit report claim this risks less attention being paid on priorities which generate that revenue. This was seen as *“a passive, reactive position.”*<sup>[6]</sup> As we have seen best practice food safety embedded in corporate culture, actively builds a company’s bottom line.

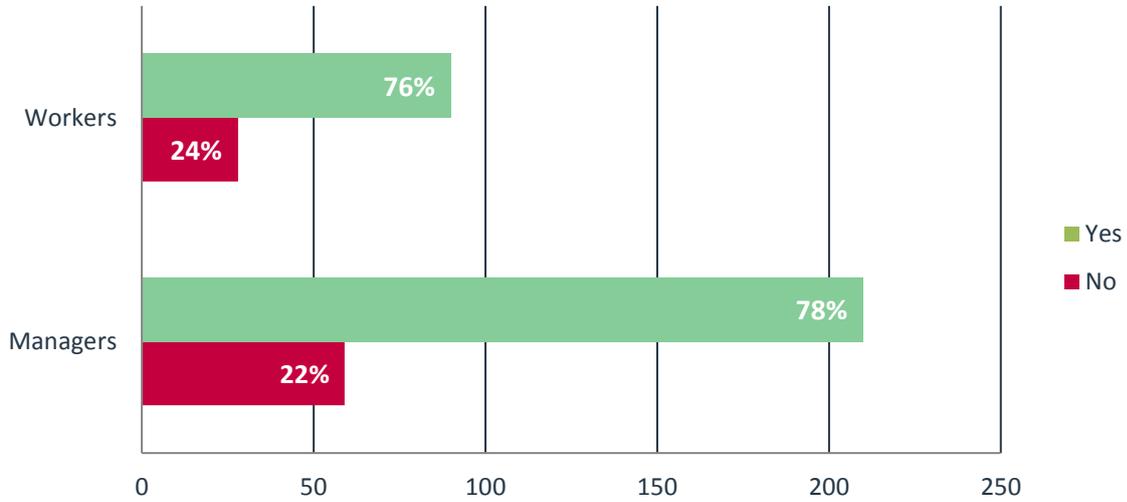
### 2. Lack of leadership

Implementation of any food safety standards have to be understood clearly by staff who receive food safety training. Leadership communication is crucial, with emphasis on telling employees how and why to implement, rather than just what they should do and when.

**Managers:** According to a [Food Safety Certification and Knowledge study](#) (USA 2014)<sup>[3]</sup>, for both managers and workers solid food safety knowledge was related to food safety certification and having a manager with greater food safety knowledge. Additional statistics from the study of 386 restaurant managers and 376 restaurant workers can be seen in the graphic below.



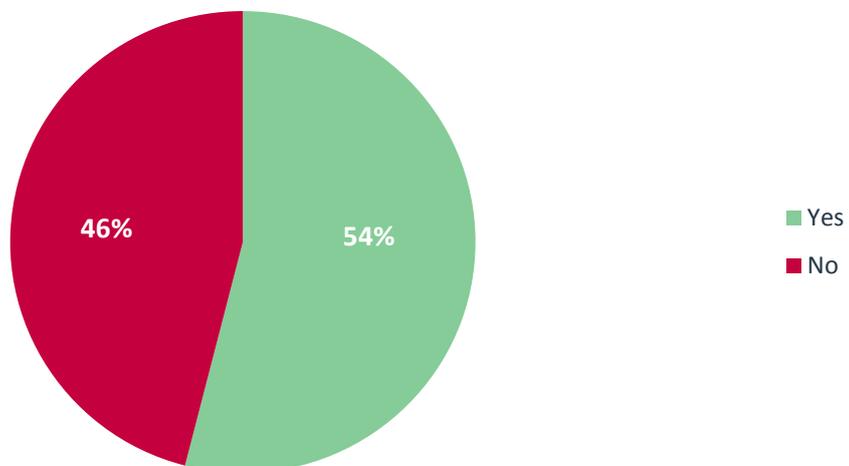
### Holds a food safety certificate from an accredited organization (of those certified)



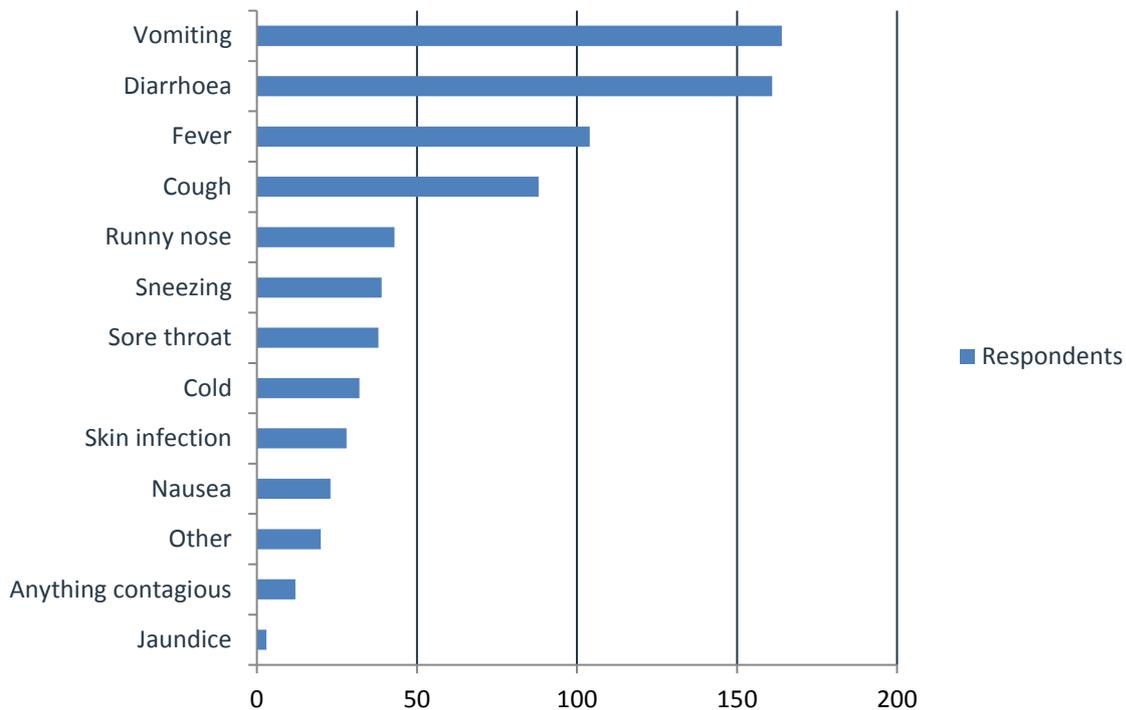
**Company-wide:** A [Working When Sick study](#) (USA 2015)<sup>[4]</sup> reported that 12 percent of workers said they worked when they were sick, with vomiting or diarrhoea on two or more shifts during the previous year. Workers were more likely to say they had worked when unwell in a restaurant that did not have a policy that required workers to tell a manager when they were sick.

Interestingly, the report also identified that, of the sample of 426 restaurants, only just over half had a written policy on sick employees. Other notable statistics from the study are displayed below.

### Establishments with written policy on ill workers



## Symptoms requiring food workers to be excluded from work



### 3. Clunky Manual Checks

FDA Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) biological, chemical and physical safety checks are often seen as a time consuming hassle. When staff are busy, this can be impractical and seen as adding unreasonable responsibilities, so food safety standards become resented at all levels: from procurement, raw material management, through manufacturing, to ultimate distribution of the finished product.

### 4. Falsification of Records

Food safety monitoring systems are often paper-based, so easy to falsify and time-consuming for management to review, particularly where your business involves multiple sites. *“The days of pen and paper records need to be long gone. They are easily corruptible. We see it in the news all the time about other people doctoring their paperwork”*, says Sarah Daniels from The RedCat Partnership.<sup>[6]</sup>

### 5. Staff Turnover

High staff turnover is endemic in the food industry, and is particularly relevant to manufacturing and hospitality. This makes for a constant management battle against time to provide effective food safety training, only to lose people after investing time.

### 6. Inconsistent audits

There’s a quiet anger among some in the industry regarding the inconsistency of food safety audits. When they are completed too infrequently, there’s less motivation to be audit-

ready. And when they are judged using criteria that changes from one visit to the next, it's difficult for a business to show it is making the effort to improve. Both lead to decreased engagement with food safety.

Psychological biases explain why staff fail to follow food safety procedures and value food hygiene, such as:

### 1. “It Won’t Happen To Me”

If your business has a strong track record on food safety, staff become overly optimistic about the risks their practice poses. Complacency is a hazard, so expecting the unexpected is a vital attitude to instil in food safety training.

But contamination can happen, even to a top ranking Michelin-starred restaurant. Take for example the [Norovirus outbreak at Noma](#) or Blumenthal’s Fat Duck contamination incident.<sup>[2]</sup>

### 2. Positivity Bias: “All Under Control”

Confidence in your business and leadership make the possibility of breaches seem unlikely. Staff are under false illusions about their own potential contribution to risk.



### 3. Cognitive Dissonance

Knowing the rules doesn’t guarantee staff will follow them. Monitoring and analysis may be seen as tedious, resulting in displacement activity. Simple safety activities, for instance, fetching a fresh box of protective gloves might be seen as reducing time available for monitored activities, such as packaging output.

Staff being told to follow particular safety procedures in training that are impossible in practice are not uncommon, leaving them with conflicting priorities. Managers ask staff to prioritise certain tasks, “before giving them a long list of other jobs to do”.<sup>[6]</sup>

In the [Food Worker Handwashing Study](#),<sup>[5]</sup> “Handwashing rates were lowest after workers touched their bodies (for example after scratching their noses). Workers may not know they need to wash their hands after touching their bodies or may think it takes too much time to wash their hands every time they touch their bodies.” The percentage of food workers who said they washed their hands after certain activities are displayed below.

### Handwashing rates by activity



#### 4. Attitudinal Ambivalence

When staff are unsure about conflicting priorities, ambivalence towards management and cutting corners follows. Lack of knowledge about food safety is not necessarily the problem. This is what Sterling Crew calls “Attitudinal ambivalence”,<sup>[6]</sup> which Sophia Griffiths describes as the thinking that [there are simply more important matters than food safety](#)<sup>[13]</sup>.

#### 5. Paranoia

Overly strict food safety monitoring can undermine confidence and motivation. Staff can become worried their every move is being scrutinised and they are not trusted.

There is a fine balance between judging individual performance and helping teams to understand why checks are necessary despite a busy schedule. Keeping employees engaged and energised is a vital challenge.

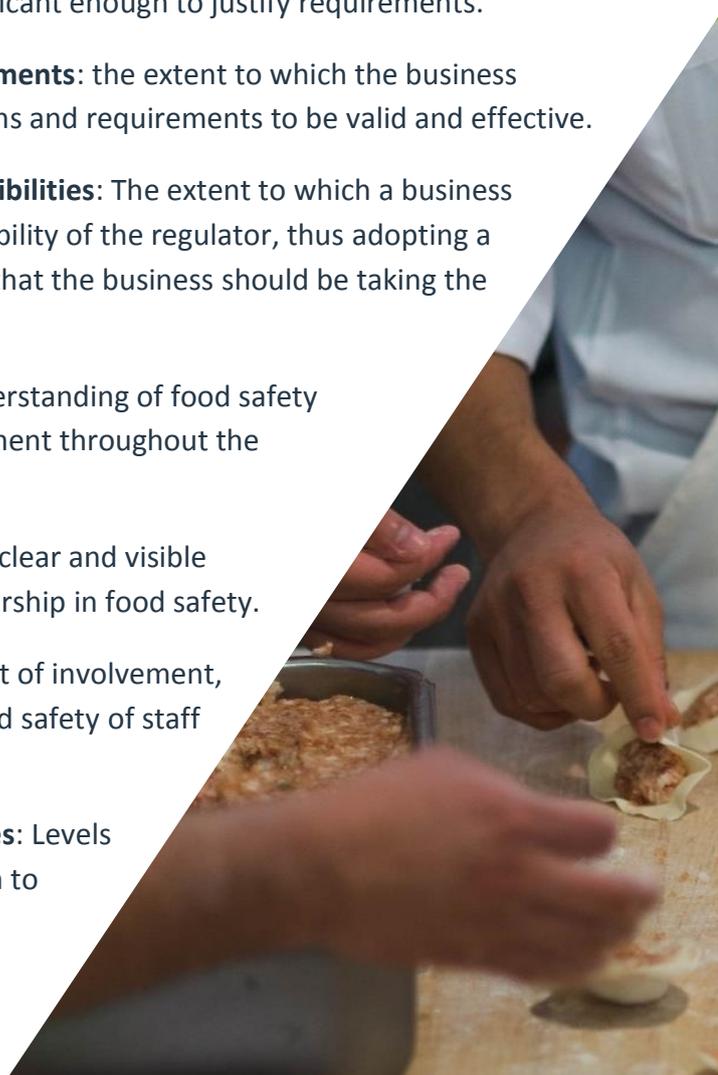
## Assessing the State of Your Business' Existing Food Safety Culture

Before implementing any changes, as a business owner, you must try and establish a benchmark regarding the state of your company's food safety culture from which to measure progress. In 2012, the Food Standards Agency released a Food Safety Culture [Diagnostic Toolkit](#) to help inspectors assess the Food Safety culture of SME's.<sup>[10]</sup>

Studies by Yiannas<sup>[22]</sup>, Powell<sup>[18]</sup>, Griffith<sup>[12]</sup> and the Institute of Employment Studies<sup>[15]</sup> suggest that food safety culture can be said to have the following elements:

1. **Priorities and attitudes:** Food business's attitudes towards food safety and the degree to which food safety is prioritised within the organisation.
2. **Perceptions and knowledge of food hazards:** management and staff perceptions and knowledge of the hazards associated with food hygiene in food businesses. This includes awareness of whether they are significant enough to justify requirements.
3. **Confidence in food safety requirements:** the extent to which the business perceives the food hygiene regulations and requirements to be valid and effective.
4. **Ownership of food safety responsibilities:** The extent to which a business sees food hygiene to be the responsibility of the regulator, thus adopting a reactive approach, versus accepting that the business should be taking the lead.
5. **Competence:** Knowledge and understanding of food safety hazards and associated risk management throughout the organisation.
6. **Internal leadership:** The extent of clear and visible management commitment and leadership in food safety.
7. **Employee involvement:** The extent of involvement, ownership and accountability for food safety of staff at all levels of the business.
8. **Communications within businesses:** Levels of open communication and freedom to challenge and discuss practices.

Though intended for use by



inspectors to evaluate food safety culture within SME's, the FSA Toolkit framework can be easily applied to larger businesses. It categorises a business' food safety culture in the following way:

- Calculative non-compliers
- Doubting compliers
- Dependent Compliers
- Proactive compliers
- Leaders

Each of these attitude categories behave and need to be dealt with in a different way, as the table in the next section illustrates.

### How to Bring About Organizational Culture Change

In his article *“Creating a Culture of Food Safety”*, Geoff Schaadt claims the first step to lasting change comes with senior management accepting *“that they will not likely face a more difficult challenge in their professional career”*.<sup>[20]</sup> Members of the executive team must be completely committed to cultural change.

As previously stated, each of the five categories established in the FSA toolkit require different approaches to bring about a change in attitudes; these are illustrated in the following table.

Category	What they say	How to enable improvement
Calculative non-compliers	<i>“I never bother wasting time on something that doesn't make money”</i>	Challenge and convert
Doubting compliers	<i>“We've never had a problem in all the time we've been trading”</i>	Convince and dispel doubts
Dependent Compliers	<i>“Just give me a list of what you want me to do and I will do it”</i>	Encourage and enable self-reliance
Proactive compliers	<i>“We encourage all staff to take ownership and responsibility for food safety and we challenge non-compliance”</i>	Applaud and encourage next steps.
Leaders	<i>“We pride ourselves on the safety and hygiene practices of our business”</i>	Applaud and reinforce commitment to best practices.

Corporate culture favours the status quo; change management is difficult. However, Sterling Crew claims that the transition to a food safety focussed culture can happen incrementally. Indeed rushing through extensive changes can be *“detrimental”* and thus

counter-productive. However, the report recommends a behaviour-based approach, involving a number of key considerations.

*“You can’t do everything at once. You can’t change your culture overnight. It’s impossible. But just taking those few most serious things and trying to work on them and improve them and looking at that in relation to everything else is a way of being able to positively move forward without being overwhelmed.”* (Dr Joanne Taylor, Co-Director at Taylor Shannon International).<sup>[17]</sup>

**Expert Contribution: Dr Rosemarie Pearson ([Dialog Training](#))**

*“To achieve a good culture, food safety and food hygiene must have a high priority in the business, alongside quality and cost effectiveness. This needs to be communicated to employees through all channels which includes all types of training, team briefings, notice boards and especially on an everyday basis providing positive feedback to create a desire to achieve required standards.*



*There needs to be a high level of compliance with the organisation’s laid down (documented) policies and procedures plus a willingness by everyone to learn from mistakes with a desire to improve.*

*Having a blame culture when things go wrong will have a negative impact on Food Safety Culture, all working together to try and improve and prevent mistakes will have a positive impact. Senior management commitment is vital to ensure resources and facilities are available to achieve those requirements as often the response from food handlers about problems is that there is no money or time.*

*Everyone should be involved in looking at solutions and cost effectiveness to improve, everyone needs to feel involved and valued. Effective training and development of people plays an important part.”*

Most importantly, food safety culture can only be developed when the workforce as a whole accept that everybody has a part to play.

### **Beyond Food Safety Training**

While food safety training is important, conversely, it can also generate a false sense of security that once done, staff are therefore aware of the rules and expectations upon them. However, staff need to understand reasons why rules are established.

When staff understand, if there is not a collaborative culture, where staff feel valued, there may be unconscious resistance. Changing attitudes so that staff understand the rationale for new standards and that risky behaviours create unsafe food is only part of the process of transition to a strong food safety culture.

Managers need to be clear that staff know how to undertake their tasks to optimise food hygiene standards, which means supporting staff where safety checks show food quality problems, without judgement. A generally supportive work atmosphere will generate commitment to improvement.

Training only provides technical knowledge only. Food safety is about engaging staff and getting people to buy in by building a culture of trust, which enhances accountability and continual improvement. Managers can get caught up in processes and systems, rather than building staff confidence and morale. As Sterling Crew, of Kolak Snack Foods says: *“Food safety culture is what happens when management isn’t there. It’s not just about training people. It’s about changing what they do.”*<sup>[17]</sup>



In terms of people, culture change starts at the top of any organization. The Board need to be committed to allowing time and resources for lasting change. Their support sends the message that new procedures are important.

Attacking the problem from the bottom-up will generate resistance and the kind of problems seen in companies with a weak food quality culture.

### The Role of Technology in Organizational Culture

The other side of the equation for successful culture change is the role of technology which offers a range of cost saving benefits and secure business longevity. From automated fridge monitors, to mobile apps to and cloud data storage, food safety is being made easier with innovative technologies. Paper based record systems being replaced with digital systems are supporting staff to manage food safety better and faster.

Technology's increasing accessibility to businesses of all sizes means it has an increasingly important role to play in developing and nurturing food safety culture.

### E-Learning

For organizations who have not experienced the benefits of e-learning, it is worth considering the following:

1. Food safety training and induction processes set new employees on the path to embracing food safety culture; e-learning helps save time and resources, as well as ensuring that content is up to date. Furthermore, companies outsourcing to e-learning providers are able to see how well participants have learnt the material and what employee strengths and weaknesses are.



2. As well as the industry standard Level 2 Food Safety and Hygiene course, modules have been developed on specific subjects such as Allergy Awareness, COSHH and HACCP.
3. Research<sup>[15, 16]</sup> shows that e-learning reduces learning time by at least 25 to 60 percent.

**M&S**  
EST. 1884

Retailing giants M&S saved £500k in a year by making the switch to e-learning for one of their needs<sup>[15]</sup>. This also improved customer service by 22 percent and became more profitable as a result.

## Automating Food Safety Management Systems

The FSA states that: *“As part of routine inspections, the enforcement officer will check that the business has an appropriate HACCP-based food safety management system in place”*,<sup>[11]</sup> making attention to systems vital for compliance purposes.

Advances in technology means comprehensive and paperless food safety management systems are becoming an increasingly popular option for businesses looking to streamline their admin and costs, with some of the benefits as follows:

1. Data capture can be automated, by e.g. installing fixed sensors to capture fridge temperatures remotely and consistently. Similarly, the number of times a freezer door gets opened at a distant satellite site within a given timeframe can also be monitored centrally. Fewer manual checks and reduced form filling free up time for focussing on food quality and hygienic processing.



2. Handheld sensor technology options are also increasingly sophisticated, but can simplify temperature, bacterial and chemical checks. Connected to IT systems, they enable simpler data handling. Data transmission from the various food technologies deployable make analysis and reporting much faster, easier and more meaningful. They also ease the burden of compliance.

For example, temperature sensors transfer data to a central hub as often as required – at few-minute intervals if desired. A user-friendly software screen then provides a real-time information feed to managers, so they can see what’s happening at key food risk hotspots. With less effort than ever before, time and financial savings can be made, with larger food manufacturers benefitting massively.

3. Dr Martin Nash of Elektron Technology describes the benefits of increased transparency technologies in terms of what they facilitate: *“The way technology is moving is allowing food safety status information to be pushed right to the heart of the business, where all operators and managers and supervisors can share food safety statuses openly.”*<sup>[17]</sup>

When data is stored and synced between sites in e.g. managed cloud networks, mobile staff don't suffer any productivity downtime and can collaborate remotely in real time.

4. Food safety management is also enhanced by systems that include alerts when something isn't right, such as hazardously high temperatures. Digital systems allow for automated emails or SMS messages to alert staff to take immediate action.

5. Automation does not stop there, however, as smart software system integration allows staff to learn from on-screen prompts that explain how to address issues and mitigate risk fast. Some systems offer troubleshooting of problems directly on seeing their on-screen alerts, making following protocols simple for even the newest staff and reducing the weight of stress on the workforce.



6. Technical systems also remove the problem of faking records. Tamperproof safety records that are easy to review give everyone confidence that food safety measures are optimised and identify immediately where issues are arising.

7. Staff can complete checks ahead of schedule, or complete them late if they fall behind schedule. More in control of their own schedule, staff will feel more empowered and better about prioritising tasks.

8. The latest food technologies offer a constant stream of time-stamped data, indexed on a central hub. Checking data is easier than wading through paperwork full of unreliable figures and being ready for audit without associated last minute stresses is made much easier.

Of course deploying new technology has its challenges, for instance cost, or being heavy on IT infrastructure. However, the latest systems are levelling accessibility. Hardware and software can operate on a monthly contract, with flexible options for all sizes of food business: small or large, multi-site or single-site.

## Conclusion

Thus as we can see, while the issues of organizational culture are complex, incremental changes made from a measurable basis are not impossible and harvest results which ensure the successful longevity of food businesses and profile strength. As improvements are made at the level of senior management and, in turn, by staff at lower levels, the return makes the investment of time and money more than pay for itself.

Where staff expertise and commitment are concerned, their learning why change is essential and how they contribute is as vital as their knowing what to do and when. A positive, quality learning culture gives confidence to everyone that each understand their role and that compliance is feasible, without being onerous. Harnessing technologies to automate processes, including learning can cut costs and time in progression towards a strong food safety culture.

### *About the publishers of this paper*

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01293 610473



[appetitelearning@wrbm.com](mailto:appetitelearning@wrbm.com)



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