

# Food Safety Culture

Elements and Approach 2020



**bsi.**



Historically, delivering on the consumer expectation of safe food products has been managed using the concept of understanding and assessing food safety risk; the identification of critical points of control and the careful management of the production process.

To support this, key performance indicators that can be captured, recorded, trended and reported to give an overview of performance are identified. Overlaying an audit process and a product sampling plan provides the framework of a process that attempts to manage defect levels. When issues occur, robust root cause analysis and corrective actions are the usual reaction to a failure in the process.

This concept can be very successful if it's rooted in an experienced and very well considered understanding of all the food safety risks embedded in the supply chain. How successfully depends on the capability to manage and respond to variation, so that consistent and predictable outcomes can be established and then maintained.

If the process is flawed or there are gaps in either the understanding of the inherent risks or the ability of the people managing the process, the process is likely to be one that's managed by failure, detection and reaction. Working backward, it's been identified that these stem from how people make decisions; not specifically in the moment of crisis, but hour by hour, minute by minute.

**It's not conditions, but behaviours, that create the largest impact on food safety performance.**

Cumulatively, encouraging the right behaviours and actions within a food organization has become known as a culture of food safety. While the concept isn't new, the path to a culture of food safety hasn't always been clear. What many organizations overlook as they work toward meeting the food safety culture related requirements in standards is that the key aspects that impact culture (values, leadership, motivation) play an important part in encouraging and delivering on consumer expectations.



In order to create an effective food safety culture, it's important to understand the existing culture of an organization. It may be that one of the culture types in Table 1 is in place across an entire organization, but just as often an organization can be made up of teams of different cultures.

**Table 1 – Types of food safety culture**

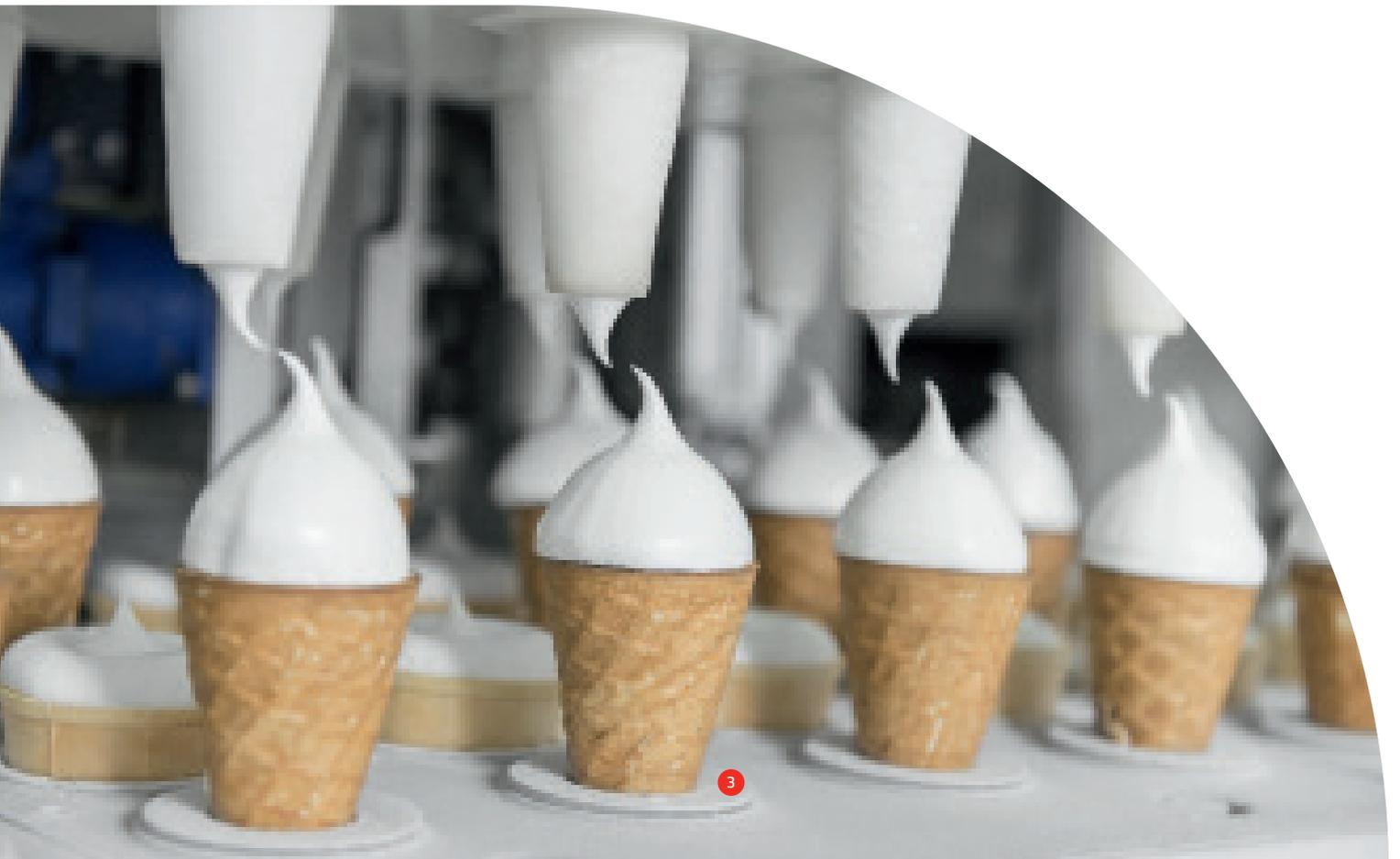
Type of culture	Safety depends on:	Quality depends on:	Lowering the defect/accident rate is:	
Reactive	Natural instinct	Reactions	A disbelief	
Dependent	Rules and supervision	Dictation and documentation	A dream	
Independent	Taking care of yourself	Personal	A goal	
Interdependent	Taking care of your teammates	Pride of work	A choice	

The common factor across all of these types of cultures is people. And, what determines whether a culture of food safety is in place is how they respond, react, make decisions and behave.

To manage these activities organizations have to actively make decisions about how they operate and conduct themselves as well as how they want the entire staff to conduct themselves.

To achieve more consistent outcomes, there are four key pillars to consider:

- Policies, values etc.
- Leadership and relationships
- Performance measures
- Motivation and reward



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## Core business values

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How a business operates is heavily influenced by its value set. If there aren't clear values, then values can differ across departments driving misalignment and likely internal conflict. If an organization's values aren't aligned and implemented across all functions, a singular culture—food safety or otherwise— isn't possible.

The value set of a business is also influenced by what level of risk it's willing to take in order to deliver its overall objectives. For food safety risk mitigation to be a priority it has to be established as a priority by the overall business and set within the overall business objectives.

When food safety risk is embedded in the individual objectives of each function, it becomes an operating parameter for every function. This creates an environment where there is never any doubt that food safety risk is defined and will never be compromised; regardless of context, circumstances and cost.

In contrast, in organizations with functionally driven agendas, food safety risk is not a determining factor in the decision making or performance indicators of every function. In a functionally driven organization a team like procurement will determine its own individual functional objectives, which may be separate and distinct to the overall business objectives.

The function of procurement is to ensure the timely delivery of materials and services, and in many organizations, it may also be challenged to drive a cost-based agenda. So, if a procurement team is not bound by an overall business value to manage food safety risk, their functional strategy doesn't have to be influenced by the risks or values of other functions; and they don't share or have to accept responsibility for the outcomes of its functional agenda in relation to food safety.

Without a clear set of business values engrained into all functional areas, functional agendas will be formed and create internal conflict and subcultures. For a food safety culture to be truly embedded, the values of an organization must be more than marketing content or embellished plaques in reception.

**Values must be defined, absolute and translatable across an organization, its functions, departments and most importantly all of its people.**

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## Leadership and relationships

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Leadership is often where the responsibility for the culture of an organization is assigned. And, once values have been set, the way that leaders conduct themselves establishes what's considered normal or acceptable behaviour in an organization. Food safety culture is no exception.

**With the level of risk and the operational standards for food safety agreed, the operating culture of the business will determine the level of success in the delivery of those standards.**

Consider the types of organizations in Table 1: reactive, dependent, independent and interdependent. Each of them has their merits and which one an organization has depends on various factors. But, regardless of which one suits an organization, how the leadership of an organization operates creates a set of behaviours that either reinforces or disregards the values dependent upon the way they react hour by hour. If the leadership disregards the agreed values in their day-to-day activities and interactions everyone else has no example to follow.

Values are challenged when a system is under pressure. There are a lot of different types of pressures applied to organizations in the food chain. Whether it's an ingredient shipment that doesn't arrive, a contamination, equipment changes or implementing new processes, a positive outcome is dependent on the culture.

Whatever the challenge, an organization with a successful food safety culture will react in a way that recognizes and mitigates any food safety risk as the priority; and this relies on relationships.

How individuals react to each other, how teams interact, how functions cooperate, are all examples of relationships within a food sector organization. For good outcomes to become more predictable, food safety needs to be understood as the natural winner in every conflict situation. When faced with a challenge or incident, it's not often down to just one person to resolve. But when the mutually agreed priority is food safety, the route to resolution is smoother and likely shorter.

## Performance measures

It's widely accepted that in order to determine change, measurement is required. But what's less understood is that what's measured and how it's reported can impact a food safety culture positively or negatively.

To embed a positive food safety culture and to influence the future, leading indicators should be used for measurement. Leading indicators measure a performance that might predict future success, whereas their opposite, lagging indicators, measure past performance. A lead example would be the number of staff wearing hairnets, a lag indicator would be the number of times hair was found in the finished product.

Lagging indicators (issues, incidents, product holds, rejections, withdrawals, etc) can't be ignored and should still be measured to better understand the cost and the consequences of not assessing risk thoroughly enough, not preparing well and not responding in the right way.

**But focussing on failures, and imposing penalties and consequences drives a fear of failure. This may drive a short-term agenda, but it won't change a culture for the better.**

Measuring, targeting and reporting on things that help eliminate areas of concern are far more likely to drive a positive operating culture.

## Motivation and reward

In a functioning, independent or interdependent culture, an organization encourages the identification of food safety concerns by all team members. How they're followed up is important. Issues raised should be considered with interest and investigated thoroughly with a view to understanding them and how they can be resolved; not with the intent of assigning blame.

**Rewarding the identification and removal of concerns and issues encourages a proactive and optimistic culture, driving passionate and insightful characteristics. Leadership must reinforce this by recognizing and celebrating such interventions.**

Rewards don't have to be financial or monetary. Reward for behaving and responding in a way that protects and upholds the value set drives a positive culture. In turn, this drives others to behave and respond in the same way, creating a positive focus on food safety; normalizing the openness that a culture of food safety requires to thrive.

Considering these elements within a business and taking action as needed can lead to a positive, interdependent culture where the organization's values are held true at every level. This doesn't mean that an organization doesn't have the capability to evaluate changes or challenges against risk, but instead that the outcome is informed, considered and will stand the test of internal and external scrutiny.



## Why BSI?

BSI believes the world deserves safe, sustainable and socially responsible food. We offer a broad range of certification and risk management services to help organizations in the food and retail supply chain mitigate risk, protect their brands and build resilient supply chains.

With 90 offices around the world, we are a leading food safety and certification provider with the capacity and capability to provide integrated services for a wide range of food safety and business improvement standards across the entire food and retail supply chain; including GFSI-recognized standards.



## Our products and services

### Knowledge

The core of our business centres on the knowledge that we create and impart to our clients.

In the standards arena we continue to build our reputation as an expert body, bringing together experts from industry to shape standards at local, regional and international levels.

### Assurance

Independent assessment of the conformity of a process or product to a particular standard ensures that our clients perform to a high level of excellence. We train our clients in world-class implementation and auditing techniques to ensure they maximize the benefits of standards.

### Compliance

To experience real, long-term benefits, our clients need to ensure ongoing compliance to a regulation, market need or standard so that it becomes an embedded habit. We provide a range of services and differentiated management tools which help facilitate this process.

For more information on improving your organization's food safety culture, visit [bsigroup.com/foodsafety](https://www.bsigroup.com/foodsafety) email [foodsafety@bsigroup.com](mailto:foodsafety@bsigroup.com)