

# The Complexity of Articulating In-house Food Safety Culture: Perspectives from Senior Managers in Food Manufacturing and Processing Facilities

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## Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that a congruous or harmonious food safety culture (FSC) is central to delivering continuously safe food outcomes to protect consumer safety, brand reputation, operational viability and legal compliance<sup>1,2</sup>. Consequently, food safety expectations communicated by senior management ultimately shape the FSC underpinning food safety governance company-wide.

While discussion surrounding consistent or cohesive FSC definitions, terminology and characteristics continue in academic circles<sup>3</sup>, how the food business entity should conceptualise and articulate their own in-house culture is less well understood<sup>4,5</sup>. Indeed, adages such as “walk the talk” “lead by example” and “it’s the way we do things around here” are easier to translate into food safety behaviour if the underpinning expectations are effectively conveyed.

Therefore, in order to progress this particular FSC field of inquiry, exploring perceptions and attitudes towards current state prevailing cultures in food manufacturing and processing environments may prove helpful to guide and support leaders and senior managers towards creating a food safety statement (e.g. vision, mission, strategy) that captures the business aim with objectives that are meaningful to employees.

## Purpose

To explore senior manager attitudes towards, and perceptions of, company food safety expectations and food safety culture in multiple food manufacturing and processing facilities as an indication of articulating in-house culture.

## Methods

- In-depth interview ( $n=40$ ) with senior managers or persons with food safety authority in high risk/low care and low risk food manufacturing and processing facilities ( $n=4$ ) discussed FSC characteristics encompassing vision, mission and company strategy directing food safety expectations.
- Data, once transcribed, were analysed, synthesised and coded thematically (in NVivo, Version 12) with representative quotes extracted to demonstrate the complex diversity of articulating in-house FSC (presented by business facility for contrast).
- Ethical approval granted by Cardiff Metropolitan University (Reference PGR-648 and PGT-3652)

## References

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## Results

Overall, interview responses highlighted the complexity of articulating food safety culture (FSC) in practice as seldom was a definitive or precise explanation provided. Indeed, more often than not, reflections on food safety or management systems and processes were discussed instead. Themes included food safety values, ownership, accountability, communication, and real-world conditions.

### FSC is...food safety values

Often, participants would draw on examples surrounding the safety of food products when discussing FSC, in particular, the consequences for consumers when things go wrong. However, this was often associated with legal aspects – to maintain minimum compliance – as opposed to communicating a deeper level of food safety understanding incorporating behavioural expectations.

*“It means basically, that what we’re doing is safe, and it’s not going to kill anybody [...] So it’s making sure that it’s safe to eat. And we’ve taken all steps as a business to make that safe as it can be.” Facility 1*

*“I do think it’s absolutely imperative that the staff understand that because it could result in someone, loss of life or injury and that’s something that, it’s a huge responsibility and we shouldn’t take it lightly.” Facility 2*

*“And I think the best way to explain it is that, to staff, the food that we produce is sold to hospitals and schools. And, yeah, the people that will be buying the product are inevitably at risk. And I think that’s the best way to get the message across because you’re talking jargon and it just goes above their head. When you speak about ‘legal’ and ‘ethical’ and that sort of thing.” Facility 3*

### FSC is...being accountable

Despite sporadic food safety training, senior managers perceived that food safety accountability, monitoring and surveillance was managed by employees with low-level management responsibilities (such as shop-floor supervisors, department or team leaders). However, in reality, this expectation was often complicated given the lack of documented food safety strategy, direction and defined roles and responsibilities.

*“We talk about a lot of our procurement agenda and they all should be to the benefit of [company name] and protecting of not just the product, of the jobs as well as the of what we make. But overall, do we have a clear objective vision at the moment? I don’t see it. I don’t think we do.” Facility 2*

*“You know I’m, I’m no higher than they are. I’m the same level as a supervisor. I’ve got no authority over them. I’ve got to try and work with the managers to get the message through to these people to get these things done which is, which can be very difficult.” Facility 3*

*“I don’t think people on the shop floor would know what the company vision is or what necessarily they are looking to work towards.” Facility 2*

*“I mean getting [...] any sort of change - major change – just is a lot, it’s a lot of effort. A lot of manpower as well. And I think, that’s [...] my worry, my worry is that - because we are so productivity focused.” Facility 4*

### FSC is...food safety ownership

Suggestive of positive moral and ethical principles, food safety ownership and responsibility (company and industry wide) was perceived as being a reflection of FSC, with terms such as ‘integrity’ and ‘priority’ used to describe safe food production.

*“Food safety culture is [...] about the integrity of what you do in my mind. And ensuring that everybody within the business has a understanding and a responsibility all at different [...] for the products that we make being [...] safe. Really, at all times, but it, culture is a is a, it’s a difficult term really, because it’s, it’s quite general, but it’s a way of being and so food safety culture for me is that everybody within a business, within an industry, has an eye for quality and safety and the integrity of the food that we produce.” Facility 2*

*“It’s ensuring that everybody within the business takes food safety as priority, basically, everyone, everybody understands what food safety means and we all try our best to ensure that we comply with the rules in place.” Facility 1*

*“Um ownership from everyone. So from senior management and from production teams [...] everybody is on the same page and knows what they are doing and why they are doing it.” Facility 4*

### FSC is...effective communication

Contrary to reflections on food safety ownership, participants often indicated that the food safety strategy, mission or vision statement was either undocumented, out of date or communicated inconsistently. Thus, the value placed on food safety from the shop-floor perspective, and the expectations to be reinforced by hierarchical leadership, may lack clarity and coherence.

*“...but what this business does and what it says are one and the same thing. Yeah. It’s not a mission statement or set of goals which are written down. And actually, they’re not very well written down [...] But they’re embedded and ingrained into everyone that works here.” Facility 1*

*“I’ll say that about 5 years ago there was a mission statement [...] for [manager] it was food safety was the top priority that [manager] decided to take it and throw it in the bin.” Facility 2*

*“We have many visions, they’re just not heading in the same direction.” Facility 2*

*“I think I think one of the probably the negatives [...] is that it doesn’t get expressed as much as it should. For instance, most other companies, you have your mission statement and your objectives and your aims and we may have that, but I think the last time I heard was that it was a document from 2016. So it’s not really shown or updated.” Facility 2*

### FSC is...a reflection of real-world conditions

Reflecting on food safety culture in general, participants indicated that the culture strategy should capture the essence of real-world conditions, projecting the business purpose as manufacturers and producers of safe food products.

*“Food safety culture is ... to me, what is actually happening. Not the theory. It’s kind of, people’s opinions and actions surrounding food safety culture which is important because that’s what’s actually happening. I think um, you can you can have all the procedures and processes and theory you like, but if, if it’s not actually being applied and understood then it won’t be effective. So, good food safety culture will lead to effective food safety.” Facility 4*

## Significance of study

- Although awareness around the importance of food safety was evident, no clear articulation of in-house culture was provided.
- A superficial awareness of the concept of FSC was determined among managers/persons with food safety authority and the potential impact for food safety behaviour (particularly as the vision, mission or strategy) was seldom documented. No distinction between perceptions or attitudes dependant on facility product risk category (high/low) was evident.
- Development of a comprehensive food safety strategy reflecting real-world operating conditions encompassing precise food safety values (integrity) that enabled consistent communication and leadership would be beneficial to drive food safety focus and consistency company-wide.