

From top-floor to shop-floor: Exploring the food safety culture communication concept

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P2-79



Introduction

Food safety culture exists (FSC) in every food business whether it is acknowledged, celebrated or ignored^{1,2}. Academics have described the concept as everything from a 'shared value system'³ to a 'fuzzy concept'⁴, however, translating terminologies into practice can prove difficult for businesses. Before FSC strategies are communicated company-wide, managers must be confident that they understand the concept so that realistic direction and sustainable expectations can be shared². Establishing current state FSC perceptions is therefore considered an important first step for an operational food business' FSC maturity progression.

Purpose

To explore manager attitudes and perceptions towards FSC in a food manufacturing and processing business, and review company documentation and communication mechanisms to identify gaps and inconsistencies for future company FSC strategy.

Ethical Approval: Approval was obtained to conduct this study from the Food and Health Sciences Panel at Cardiff Metropolitan University (PGR-648).



Methods

A qualitative coding method following the GFSI² FSC dimensional framework was adopted to analyse 23 semi-structured interviews with hierarchical managers (senior (SM) $n=5$, middle (MM) $n=5$, junior (JM) $n=13$) at food manufacturing and processing sites including managers at head office (HO). Company documentation and communication mechanisms were analysed following the same structure.

Conclusions

- The GFSI's framework highlights critical components necessary to progress FSC maturity, one of which is for SM's to develop a company vision which can be shared, and thus embedded, throughout the organisation. Such a formality ensures that all employees have a common purpose which is clear and consistent.
- For MM's and JM's, clarity and consistency in documented form (articulating the business vision, mission and shared values to achieve the same) would ensure that FSC perceptions - from top-floor to shop-floor - accord across all operational functions.
- Consideration should also be given to effective/creative communication strategies which appropriately address the complexities of a multi-site and multi-departmental food business in the absence of food handler computer access.
- Enhancing food safety is the core purpose of FSC and so defining business priorities (e.g. productivity, the 'customer' and 'consumer' relationship) and the interconnected nature of the same may positively progress FSC awareness.

The author acknowledges the funding body (KESS2) and food business involvement in this PhD project and the continued industry learning opportunities it provides.

References:

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Results

Management Perceptions

Manager attitudes towards FSC, its concept, importance and relevance to the business was mixed especially among junior managers who are immersed in production departments on a daily basis.

"I think we know whether we've got people in the business who are, that are living to those standards that we accept and are able to immerse themselves in the culture." SM, HO

"Nine times out of ten um you know the focus is on production. On getting the stuff out the door." MM, Site 1

"Um with safety culture, what petrifies me, how to measure it. How to practically start all that process." JM, Site 2

"Food Safety Culture. Huhhh [sigh]. I've got mixed views." JM, Site 3

"I mean everyone seems to understand but I think there, there is a bit of a, I don't know, I haven't seen a great deal of understanding, from maybe the next level up [HO]. They know that we need to have a food safety culture!" JM, Site 3



Company Documentation and Communication Mechanism Review

- No formal FSC strategy existed at the business, nevertheless, the Quality Management System (Figure 1) suggested that 'customer satisfaction' and 'customer service' was paramount. The 'customer' therein being the food business operator to which products are delivered (and not the consumer).

QUALITY MANAGEMENT POLICY :

...prides itself with a reputation built on the foundation of providing complete Customer Satisfaction. With Continual Customer Service being the primary focus...

Figure 1: Company Quality Management System (Policy) Extract

- Notice boards (at every site) drew attention to the business' FSC endeavours, noting that staff should 'Think Customer', using visual graphics portraying the vulnerable consumer groups.
- Communication company-wide was perceived to be difficult as "those without an email address [relied] upon the management team of that area." (MM, HO); with almost all food handlers in production having limited, or no access, to a computer.

Significance

- The study highlighted the difficulties in conceptualising, articulating, documenting, measuring and communicating FSC consistently in a multi-site food business.
- Although senior managers are the FSC 'driving' force² - with middle managers an essential conduit to subordinates - junior managers should be considered the 'sharing' force. Thus, clarity on FSC strategy and direction (documented) should recognise the importance and power of effective communication from the outset. How the message is received may greatly influence future FSC progress.