

## Chapter 2

# Why the Focus on Culture?

*Every man's ability may be strengthened or increased by culture.*

Sir John Abbott, 3rd Prime Minister of Canada (1821–1893)

If your organization's goal is to create a bigger or better food safety program, then I suggest that although you may be well intentioned, you might be missing the mark? Your goal should be to create a food safety culture – not a food safety program (Fig. 2.1). There is a big difference between the two.

Culture is one of those terms getting used often in today's society, maybe even overused. So what does it really mean? The words we choose and how we use them are important. They're more important than we sometimes realize. They're the foundation of effective communication. So let's take a moment to review the word culture.

## What Is Culture?

As a food scientist, culture may be one of those terms that seems a little fuzzy or abstract. It's hard for us to wrap our arms around it. We feel much more comfortable talking about specific microbes, pH, water activity, and temperature. We consider these the hard science. We feel less comfortable talking about terms related to human behavior such as culture – often called the “soft stuff.” To make this point, let's pretend you were to ask 10 different food scientists to define culture for you. What do you think their answers would be? It's very likely that you would get 10 different answers. But if you were to ask these same 10 individuals to define pH or water activity, I suspect their answers would be much more similar.

If you look at foodborne disease trends over the past few decades, it's clear to me that the soft stuff is still the hard stuff. We won't make dramatic improvements in reducing the global burden of foodborne disease, especially in certain parts of the food system and world, until we get much better at influencing and changing human behavior (the soft stuff).

So what is culture? Well, one of the best definitions that I've come across (Coreil, Bryant, and Henderson, 2001) states “Culture is patterned ways of thought and behavior that characterize a social group, which can be learned through socialization processes and persist through time.” Accordingly, from

**Fig. 2.1** Food safety culture—  
not a food safety program



our perspective, a food safety culture can then be viewed as how and what the employees in a company or organization think about food safety. It's the food safety behaviors that they routinely practice and demonstrate. According to this definition, employees will learn these thoughts and behaviors by simply becoming part of the company or organizational group. Furthermore, these thoughts or behaviors will permeate throughout the entire organization. And if you truly create a food safety culture, these thoughts and behaviors will be sustained over time as opposed to being the “program of the month” or this year’s focus.

A more technical definition by the Health and Safety Commission (1993) states, “The safety culture of an organization is the product of the individual and group values, attitudes, competencies and patterns of behavior that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organization’s health and safety programs. Organizations with a positive safety culture are characterized by communications founded on mutual trust, by shared perceptions of the importance of safety, and by confidence in the efficacy of preventative measures.” Although this definition is a bit more technical, I like the fact that it illustrates a food safety culture is made up of both individual and group thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. It illustrates that food safety is independent. Each employee or person within an organization has a personal responsibility for preparing or serving safe food. It also illustrates that food safety is interdependent. All employees within the whole of the organization or company have a shared responsibility to ensure food safety. And the sum of food safety efforts within an organization is critically dependent on and greater than its parts.

But my all time favorite definition, because of its simplicity, is “Culture is the way we do things around here.” Simply put, a food safety culture is how an organization or group does food safety.

## Why Is Culture Important?

I want you to pause for a moment and take off your “food safety” hat. Think about a major catastrophic safety accident that you’ve read about in the newspaper or heard about on the news (Fig. 2.2). Do you recall what the underlying root cause was? Was it reported that the accident was due to faulty design? Was it attributed to operator error? Do you recall if improper training was implicated as the cause?

In major or catastrophic safety accidents of our day, it is not uncommon for the immediate cause to be identified, for example, as faulty design,

<p>In major safety accident investigations, an underlying root cause is (select one)?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Faulty design</li><li>2. Operator error</li><li>3. Improper training</li><li>4. Organizational culture</li></ol>
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**Fig. 2.2** Accident investigation root causes

operator error, or improper training. However, if you take a closer look at investigations of major accidents such as Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and the Shuttle Disaster, an underlying cause – the organization’s culture – is often cited as the foundational issue that goes deeper than the immediate or apparent reason. As an important illustration of this point, on February 1, 2003, the United States of America suffered the tragic loss of the Space Shuttle Columbia and its seven-member crew. The physical cause of the accident was determined to be a breach in the Thermal Protection System on the leading edge of the left wing of the shuttle. The damage occurred when a piece of insulating foam separated from the external tank shortly after launch striking the left wing. Although the accident investigation report was exhaustive and detailed, there was one statement in particular in the report that stood out to me. The Columbia Accident Investigation Board (2003) concluded, “In our view, the NASA organizational culture had as much to do with this accident as the foam.” This quote serves as a powerful and sobering reminder of the importance of culture.

There is no question that an organization’s culture influences how it does safety. The organization’s culture will influence how individuals within the group think about safety, their attitudes toward safety, their willingness to openly discuss safety concerns and share differing opinions, and, in general, the emphasis that they place on safety. So is this point also applicable in the field of food safety? Of course it is. However, it’s interesting to note that it’s uncommon to see reports of foodborne outbreak investigations or other significant food safety events where the organization’s culture is even mentioned. I suggest that in some of the major food safety incidents of our day, the organization’s culture has also played a key role.

## Who Creates Culture?

In an organization or social group, food safety is a shared responsibility. There is no question about it. But when it comes to creating, strengthening, or sustaining a culture within an organization, there is one group of individuals who really own it – they’re the leaders.

I came across a quote by Edgar Schein (1992), author on organizational culture, which states this point quite well. He said, “Organizational cultures are created by leaders, and one of the most decisive functions of leadership may well be the creation, the management, and – if and when necessary – the destruction of culture.”

Although this quote may strike you as being a bit strong, it’s true. The strength of an organization’s food safety culture is a direct reflection of how important food safety is to its leadership. A food safety culture starts at the top and flows downward. It is not created from the bottom up. If an organization’s food safety culture is less than acceptable, it’s the leaders who are ultimately responsible and who own it.

Now, don’t think for a minute that I’m implying that a mid-level food safety manager or quality assurance professional within an organization has no role in creating or managing a food safety culture. I’m not suggesting this at all. I’ve seen this all too often where an ineffective mid-level food safety professional blames senior management on the lack of effectiveness of their food safety efforts. To effectively influence upward, mid-level professionals need to recognize that their goal is to help senior leadership create a food safety culture, not to simply support the food safety programs that they’re managing. To do this, they need to thoroughly understand the elements of organizational culture and the dimensions of human behavior. They also need to have effective relationship, communication, and influence skills. Mid level managers are also considered leaders too. And they have a responsibility to effectively advise senior leadership and influence upwards. They also own the culture.

## **How Is Culture Created?**

Having a strong food safety culture is a choice. Ideally, the leaders of an organization will proactively choose to have a strong food safety culture because it’s the right thing to do. Safety is a firm value of the organization. Notice that I said “it’s a value and not a priority.” Priorities can change; values should not (Geller, 2005). The organization chooses to have a strong food safety culture, because it values the safety of its customers and employees. The leaders of the organization have vision and foresight, knowing that having a strong food safety culture is important and that it directly and indirectly benefits the business.

Although less desirable, for other organizations or groups, establishing a strong food safety culture might be driven out of necessity. Their focus on improving their food safety culture is reactionary. It’s driven by a significant or major event. They’ve experienced a food borne illness outbreak, high profile media expose, or an important regulatory issue. They’re reacting to pressure.

Regardless of whether it’s based on a proactive vision or a reactive event, creating a strong food safety culture does not happen by chance. Simply reading

a book on it does not create it, nor will attending a seminar on the topic. And if your organization's food safety culture is already well established and it's less than acceptable, it will not be easy to change. Depending on the circumstances, changing the ingrained thoughts, beliefs and behaviors of a group can be difficult and take several years. Creating or strengthening a food safety culture will require the intentional commitment and hard work by leaders at all levels of the organization starting at the top. But the good news is that it can be done.

## The Foundation

Like building a house, a food safety culture built on a solid foundation will be much stronger. And the foundation of an organization is its values. To build an effective food safety culture, an organization or social group should clearly define safety as a foundational value. As mentioned earlier, values are different than priorities (Geller, 2005). Priorities can change depending on circumstances. Values should not. Values are deep seeded principles or beliefs that guide how an organization makes decisions and conducts its business. In many organizations with strong safety cultures, past or present leaders have articulated how much they value safety by crafting a set of guiding safety principles or safety beliefs. They have documented their commitment to safety. But before you jump to a conclusion and think that this sounds like a hokey gimmick or feel-good exercise, think again. Documenting commitments in writing is important. Cialdini (1993) in his classic book, *Influence, The Psychology of Persuasion*, shows that there is scientific evidence that a written commitment is much effective than a verbal one. According to Cialdini (1993), people want to live up to what they've written. By documenting a set of guiding food safety principles or food safety beliefs, the leaders of an organization are increasing the pressure for the actions of the organization or employees to be consistent with its beliefs. They are also making sure that the organization's values or beliefs are clear to all and that they can be shared with others. When creating a food safety culture, this is a good place to start. Call the leaders of the organization together and have them – not you – articulate and craft a set of food safety beliefs or principles.

## Core Elements

Although no two great food safety cultures will be identical, they are likely to have many similar attributes. According to a research report by Whiting and Bennett (2003), titled *Driving Towards "0", Best Practices in Corporate Safety and Health, How Leading Companies Develop Safety Cultures*, the safety cultures of 65 leading U.S. Companies had similar core elements. Although the report focused on occupational safety and health issues, let's review some of the elements they identified and how they relate to a food safety culture.

### ***Leadership at the Top***

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a food safety culture starts at the top and flows downward. It does not flow from the bottom up. It is a leadership function to create a food safety vision, set expectations, and inspire others to follow. It's interesting to note that in the field of food safety, we often talk about food safety management. We rarely talk about food safety leadership. But management and leadership are different. According to Maxwell (1998), "the main difference between the two is that leadership is about influencing people to follow, while management focuses on maintaining systems and processes." Leading companies with strong safety cultures not only have strong food safety management systems in place, they also have strong leaders committed to food safety who are able to influence others and lead the way to safer performance.

### ***Confidence in the Part of All Employees***

Employees at all levels must be certain that the organization values food safety comparably with its other values. The only way to gain employee confidence is for the leaders of an organization to walk the talk. If the organization claims that the safety of its customers and employees is a company value, rest assured that employees will be watching to make sure that the organization's actions are consistent with the talk. If they perceive any inconsistencies or compromises concerning the organization's commitment to food safety, they will lose trust. And without trust, an organization or leader is no longer credible and unlikely to be followed. Companies with strong safety cultures have earned the confidence of their employees through their actions, not words.

### ***Clear Management Visibility and Leadership***

Even if you have strong vision and leadership at the top, without buy-in and support by mid-level management, you cannot have a great food safety culture. Managers at all levels of the organization need to visibly demonstrate their commitment to food safety by the little things they say and do. Every single day, managers at all levels will influence front-line employees whether they realize it or not. If managers have a negative attitude about following proper food safety and sanitation procedures, it will be evident to others by what they say and do. For example, if the manager of a foodservice establishment doesn't wash his hands before beginning work, how can he expect the employees to do so? Instead, if the manager demonstrates a positive attitude toward food safety through his words and action, the employees will more likely do the same. In companies with strong safety cultures, a proper attitude toward food safety is more caught than taught.

### ***Accountability at All Levels***

An organization needs to make sure that employees understand the food safety performance expectations of their job and that at all levels they are held accountable for them. The word accountability generally implies that there are checks and balances being measured to make sure certain desired outcomes are being achieved. And in organizations with strong food safety cultures, this is certainly true. For example, an organization might conduct daily HACCP checks and measurements, observe employee behaviors related to food safety, and provide feedback and coaching (both positive and negative) based on the results. But in organizations with enlightened safety cultures, they've figured out a way to transcend or go beyond accountability. They've figured out a way to get employees to do the right things, not because they're being held accountable to them, but because the employees believe in and are committed to food safety. It has been said that character is what you do when you're alone and no one is watching. In organizations with enlightened food safety cultures, employees do the right thing not because the manager or customer is watching, but because they know it's right and they care.

### ***Sharing of Knowledge and Information***

The sharing of information and knowledge is like glue that holds a social group together. And organizations with strong safety cultures know this. They take the sharing of information beyond simple food safety training. They share information often and communicate regularly with their employees about food safety using a variety of messages and mediums. They realize that what we see, what we hear, and what we read, if done effectively, can have a tremendous influence on us. If it didn't, advertisers wouldn't spend the millions of dollars they do each year trying to reach consumers. Like in commercial marketing, organizations with strong food safety cultures share information not just to impart knowledge, but to persuade their employees to action.

### **Best Practices**

In addition to the core elements reviewed above, Whiting and Bennett (2003) also identified over 20 best practices among organizations with strong safety cultures as illustrated in Fig. 2.3. Again, although these best practices were related to occupational health and safety issues, many are also applicable to food safety. Best practices ranged from operational integration of safety to managers emphasizing safety as a company value to recognition of superior safety performance.

<u>Practices and Program</u>	<u>Managers Required to Show Visibility</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operational Integration</li> <li>• Motivational Program</li> <li>• Behavioral Observation &amp; Feedback</li> <li>• Safety Committees</li> <li>• Case Management</li> <li>• Safety Survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasize as a Company Value</li> <li>• Discuss Safety at Employee Meetings</li> <li>• Participate in Safety Committees</li> <li>• Do Frequent “Walk Arounds”</li> <li>• Ensure Adequate Resources</li> <li>• Ensure Employee Training</li> <li>• Create Trusting Relationships</li> <li>• Suspend Unsafe Activities</li> </ul>
<u>Front Line Supervisor Responsibilities</u>	<u>Employee Involvement</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage Safe/Discourage Unsafe Behaviors</li> <li>• Conduct hazard analysis</li> <li>• Train Employees</li> <li>• Conduct Documented Safety Inspections</li> <li>• Investigate Incidents &amp; Near Misses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety Performance Objectives</li> <li>• Recognition of Superior Safety Performance</li> <li>• Progressive Discipline for Unsafe Practices</li> </ul>

**Fig. 2.3** Safety culture best practices

Although identifying best practices can be useful, one major drawback to creating such a list is that it doesn’t really demonstrate how these activities are linked together or interrelated. In fact, this same mistake is often made by food safety professionals who benchmark with other organizations to identify a list of food safety best practices for potential implementation within their own company or place of employment. The problem with this type of approach is that it oversimplifies food safety efforts. It approaches food safety like a cafeteria with a list of potential menu options without understanding how the various best practices might be linked together or how they might influence each other. It misses or oversimplifies where these best practices or efforts fit into the bigger picture – the system.

To effectively create or sustain a food safety culture, it is critical to have a systems thinking mindset. You must realize the interdependency of each of the various efforts your organization chooses to put into practice and how the totality of those efforts might influence people’s thoughts and behaviors. In order to create a food safety culture, you need to have a *systems-based approach to food safety*. This is the topic of the next chapter.

## Key Points

- The goal of the food safety professional should be to create a food safety culture – not a food safety program.



- Culture is patterned ways of thought and behaviors that characterize a social group which can be learned through socialization processes and persist through time.
- An organization's culture will influence how individuals within the group think about food safety, their attitudes toward food safety, their willingness to openly discuss concerns and share differing opinions, and, in general, the emphasis that they place on food safety.
- When it comes to creating, strengthening, or sustaining a food safety culture within an organization, there is one group of individuals who really own it – they're the leaders.
- Having a strong food safety culture is a choice. The leaders of an organization should proactively choose to have a strong food safety culture because it's the right thing to do, as opposed to reacting to a significant issue or outbreak.
- Creating or strengthening a food safety culture will require the intentional commitment and hard work by leaders at all levels of the organization, starting at the top.
- Although no two great food safety cultures will be identical, they are likely to have many similar attributes.
- Identifying food safety best practices can be useful, but one major drawback to creating such a list is that it doesn't really demonstrate how these activities are linked together or interrelated. It misses the big picture – the system.
- To create a food safety culture, you need to have *a systems-based approach to food safety*.

Food Safety Culture

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System

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