

Chapter 2

The Food Safety Management Team

Own: to have or hold as property; to have power or mastery over; to acknowledge to be true, valid, or as claimed

Merriam Webster 2012

Having people in the food safety management program empowered to own the responsibility to reduce risk within a retail food business is an important factor in the organizations success to prevent foodborne diseases. This alone is a significant means to measure the commitment of the food retail business to food safety. Each individual food safety management team member continuously works to understand risk, initiates new projects to reduce risk, and is the leader in protecting the brand through vigilant surveillance of risk. Selection of the managers on this team is critical to the success of the program. The team members must be trained in the business of public health (subject matter experts on the prevention strategies to prevent a foodborne disease) and know how to work within cross-functional teams within the core functions of the business including the supplier food safety, regulatory compliance, and retail food safety functions.

Empowered to Own Responsibility

A restaurant owner, we'll call her Sara, noticed that every time the local health inspector visited her restaurant, she was always cited for poor sanitation. The water they stored the cloth towels in was never at the right concentration of sanitizer strength (food code requires that reused cloth towels be kept in the appropriate strength of sanitizer to ensure the towels don't spread germs). She and her employees knew this requirement well, and they always kept the kitchen looking clean (she was at the restaurant most of the time helping fill orders or cleaning between food prep). However, she also knew it was next to impossible to maintain the proper level of sanitizer in a pail of water when the same towel was used over and over to wipe up food debris, oil, grease, and raw foods.

“Using towels stored in buckets of water was the way restaurants always did this wasn’t it, and why was her restaurant being singled out all the time when this was the way health departments wanted cloth towels used.” She tried to require her employees to change the water every few hours, increase the strength of the sanitizer at the beginning of the day, made check list to try and reinforce proper use, and yet she still got “dinged” by the health inspector; it was just next to impossible to do. Reusing cloth towels to clean surfaces reminded her of when customers use to reuse the same unsanitary cloth towel to dry hands; “remember those rotating cloth towel dispensers they use to have in gas station restrooms.” That industry got rid of those towels didn’t they, and now they use disposable paper towels or blow dryers? Sara knew the inspector was correct in enforcing this rule, “he was just doing his job,” but couldn’t someone come up with a more operationally feasible method?

So Sara decided to investigate other methods to clean and sanitize surfaces without using a dirty reused towel stored in a pail of water. After all, she wouldn’t clean this way in her own kitchen at home, so why did she do this in her restaurant where she serves a great deal more people. The obvious solution was disposable wipes that already had the proper sanitizer strength built into the wipe and a means to dispense the wipes so that employees would use them properly when they cleaned and sanitized surfaces. Germs would be thrown away each time they cleaned and no more dirty bucket of water and lower health department scores. All Sara had to do was find someone to make them; this would be a game changer, and she could also save on laundry of cloth towels as well. Sara found a company that made disposable wipes and asked them to make a new dispenser to look like the red sanitizer buckets all restaurants used (but only to dispense disposable sanitizer wipes). Her employees loved the new system, the health inspector was impressed with how the employees now “toss out the germs,” and Sara was confident her restaurant had the cleanest and safest kitchen in town. Using her business savvy (knowing cost would likely prohibit use of a disposable wipe compared to reusing cloth towels), Sara developed a recycling program with the manufacturer to make their use cost neutral with laundry, chemical, and labor cost of maintaining reused cloth towels.

The most important asset a food retail business can have leading its food safety management program is the right people in the right position empowered with the responsibility of food safety for their customers like they are the owners of the business. People who have a stake in something tend to take more responsibility for it like Sara the restaurant owner in the previous story. These people challenge the status quo when things are not working as they should, desire change when improvement is needed, measure their impact continually, and ultimately improve the outcome of the business simply because they desire continuous improvement. These people also empower others in continuous improvement knowing that more rapid change comes from more people working who are aligned to the change.

People who are empowered to own responsibility like Sara in this story often-times also act expectantly for the general good of the public. In this case, Sara created an easier means to clean and sanitize food contact surfaces in a retail food establishment that others can use to reduce food safety risk in their restaurants as well. James Q. Wilson, a noted Harvard Professor and political scientist, stated

(speaking about what motivates people to do the right thing in their business without a need for regulatory oversight), “perhaps the most powerful antidote to unfettered selfishness is property rights. If we are catching lobsters off the Maine coast, we can restrict over-fishing by allocating spaces to groups who informally “own” each space” (Wall Street 2012). The business people in Dr. Wilson’s example likely already protect natural resources necessary to sustain their business through ownership, but they are much more likely to do so if they are empowered to work as if they own it. All food retail businesses can benefit through this same type of ownership, in this case, to prevent foodborne illnesses, by treating the business of food safety as a noncompetitive responsibility.

Selecting the Food Safety Management Team

So, how do you find the right people that you can trust to empower with this food safety ownership? First and foremost, they must have demonstrated competency and integrity in their previous work and have demonstrated this competency in reducing risk for another organization. In my current business culture, we describe this as the three C’s for character, competency, and chemistry which was first introduced as a template to hire great leaders by Bill Hybels in his book *Courageous Leadership* (Hybels 2002). Mr. Truett Cathy, the founder and CEO of Chick-fil-A, has said in many of his interviews and books, and I am paraphrasing this, “that you can train for competency if you have to, but it’s difficult to create character; look for character first then competency and chemistry”.

Of course competency is a requirement for a food safety management team member, but without character, the competency may be misdirected and not focused on the public health of the organizations customers. There’s an old saying that you don’t find buzzards where eagles fly, so if you want an eagle, go to where they fly. The best places to find competent food safety professionals with character are places where people are demonstrating success in promoting the science of public health. These professionals are already seeking to know more about food safety risk and how to mitigate this risk for their current organization. For example, graduate students who are pursuing an advanced science or public health degree undergo rigorous critical scrutiny of their work, must often initiate and prove new ideas, and manage projects to completion, and errors are rarely tolerated for advancement of their thesis. Thus, graduate schools of public health and food science are the first places to look to find food safety management team members.

Let me tell you a story that teaches an important lesson on the evidence that you have selected the right people to own their job responsibilities. This story is about me (so its firsthand experience), but I was only the student (and employee) being taught by someone of great character and competency, and it taught me responsibility, but also how to look for this in others before we hire them to own responsibility within our own organization. A much abbreviated part of this story was published by Mr. Truett Cathy to teach a lesson on the recipe for being happy and successful

in your work in his first book, “It’s Easier To Succeed Than Fail” (the book is out of print, but can still be found on the internet and used book stores). When I was working at a Chick-fil-A restaurant as an early teen, I was hoping to work the cash register or cook the food because these jobs seemed more important and fun. However, when I reported to work the first week, they wanted me to be the one that cleaned the equipment and restaurant, and I was very discouraged. Now this was an expected reaction of a 16 year old (I felt I was more qualified for other jobs, i.e., cleaning was below me and I didn’t like to do it at home or work). Because I knew the founder of Chick-fil-A, Mr. Truett Cathy, I spoke with him occasionally, and he asked me how I liked the job at the restaurant.

When I told Mr. Cathy how discouraged I was, he suggested that if I wanted to be successful at work (translated: given the important jobs because I demonstrated ownership of the small ones), I should ask to clean the restrooms and then clean the toilets like I was going to drink out of them. Well, needless to say, it challenged me, but I gave it a try. I cleaned those restrooms so much that customers were afraid to go into them because I hovered over them like a hawk to keep them clean. Thus, when I approached the job like I was responsible for an important part of the business (we all know that clean restrooms are important to customers in a restaurant environment), I felt pride in my work (the founder said it was important), and the more direct benefit was the restaurant owner noticed and gave me more important duties to contribute to the success of the business. I also then knew how important that job was to the business, and even though it wasn’t my job anymore, I continued to look at those restrooms to ensure they were being cleaned.

Let me tell you another story about looking for competency in those who demonstrate ownership of responsibility. I was President of the Georgia Association for Food Protection (an affiliate of the International Association for Food Protection, IAFP) during one year so I could develop relationships with other food safety and regulatory professionals. This organization had a strong program for professional development to support students and others early in their food safety careers; several students from local colleges and universities often attended these meetings. I happened to meet a fellow working on his Ph.D. who had a dream of 1 day leading my organizations’ food safety department. This fellow had already demonstrated competency in his area of research on the reduction of human pathogens from raw poultry (not to mention the necessary skills to achieve a Ph.D. while working a full time job at the USDA). When I needed to find a person to lead development of food safety specifications for suppliers in my organization, the first place I looked was at who was attending these meetings and who was hungry for making things better. This fellow ultimately was recruited and now contributes significantly to the management of food safety hazards within our organization.

Although there should be no bias toward selection of graduate level professionals like Ph.D.s, these type of students have strong evidence of character and competency and provide a template for the type of person needed to manage a business function within the food safety management program. Those who obtain an advanced degree (master’s or Ph.D.) have to go through a great deal of advanced education and independent project work, developing and communicating new knowledge in

their respective subject matter. They must then rigorously defend their work on this new knowledge as well as demonstrate its context with current knowledge to expert peers within their field (those already with advanced degrees and experience) before they are awarded the degree.

I have also found several great people already working in different areas of the food safety profession that do not have advanced degrees but work as if they are seeking one (as evidenced by their actions), studying the issues and developing solutions to them (even on their own time). These types of professionals provide another template for selection of the types of people you need to manage food safety. One of the best responses I received from a former health inspector during an interview for a new regulatory compliance staff position in my organization, when asked why she wanted to leave her current position, was (paraphrased for emphasis) “I would like to help restaurants achieve food safety rather than just measure them for regulatory compliance.” This answer was not based on what she wanted to leave but more on what she wanted to do to help retail organizations improve public health. These types of people don’t need to be assigned task but rather enabled to do what they do best to reduce hazards and develop the projects necessary for continuous improvement within the organization.

Ultimately, the best way to measure if you have selected the right person that will take ownership of their individual food safety responsibilities is to see it in action. Say a manager was responsible for monitoring serious food safety issues in your supply chain (e.g., investigating the validity of calls with a supplier after a customer calls and claims they are sick from eating one of your products) and received this call while on vacation over the weekend. However, this manager did not transfer this responsibility to someone else (equally capable) or ignored the call and waited to respond until they returned to work. This manager did not demonstrate ownership of this responsibility, and the results of this one decision could be devastating to the business IF the product (and there is likely a large volume of this product in the system) was contaminated. Not only could other customers be injured, but the responsibility for initiating a recall of this product (i.e., removing it from retail service/sale) could be required by law, and this one error could cost the business significantly. Of course, this expectation should be made clear for whomever holds this level of responsibility, and everyone needs time away from work (and this type of responsibility). The point is that “owners” are people who very rarely will allow food safety risk that may harm customers go unchecked even if they are on vacation or away from the office.

A Successful Food Safety Management Team

It would be much healthier for a business to bring food safety professionals into the organization in the beginning rather than wait for a food safety problem to occur and then look for these types of people. After a horrible series of events in 1992 that led to the death of four children and sickened over 700 due to a common source of *Escherichia coli* 0157 infection in ground beef, the Jack in the Box chain hired a new

food safety leader, Dr. Dave Theno. Dr. Theno was already working to reduce the risk of *E. coli* 0157 infections from beef as a private consultant to the National Cattleman's Beef Association. While his work ultimately improved food safety at Jack in the Box, leading the organization to win the industry coveted IAFP Black Pearl Award for Food Safety excellence, his leadership and the influence his retail food business had as a major buyer of raw red meat contributed to the improvement of food safety within the beef industry (Benedict 2011).

Finally, never delegate a food safety responsibility to a food safety management professional without providing the resources to manage this responsibility including enabling their continuous education on their specific subject matter. Once you have the right people on the food safety management team, you should enable them to measure hazards, work on continuous education and career advancement (outside your organization and among their peers to enable more ideas to prevent hazards cost effectively), and ensure they are provided the resources necessary to apply this knowledge to your organization's needs. A public health professional desires to communicate their work (i.e., as part of their professional responsibilities to share methods to prevent foodborne illnesses), teach others how to reduce risk, and work together with other food safety professionals to develop new tools of intervention that can reduce risk. Thus, the food safety professionals you select for the food safety management team will desire the same within your organization; let them. You then have influencers (see Chap. 9) in your organization that will help you integrate the teams work within the business to ensure food safety and brand protection.

References

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