

FOOD SAFETY CULTURE



BUILDING A COALITION OF FOOD SAFETY CHAMPIONS

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In Brief

When navigating changes to food safety policies and culture, developing personal connections between employees and food safety is of great value. Identifying food safety champions and building food safety coalitions within your organization can strengthen these connections and support change. When developing champions and coalitions, seek volunteers from different functions, facilities, levels, and shifts to build a diverse team with varied perspectives on food safety culture in the organization. Food safety champions are individuals with a desire to learn and grow, who have a personal connection with food safety. Food safety coalitions are comprised of champions. They are teams of individuals with credibility and leadership capability who can constructively discuss current food safety culture and recognize opportunities to strengthen that culture. Create a safe space for discussion and clear objectives serving the coalition's goal. Recognize the need for ongoing evaluation of the coalition, identifying successes and opportunities to better connect people personally with the food safety culture mission.

Key Learnings



Food safety champions and coalitions connect personally with food safety.



Food safety champions and coalitions can increase the likelihood of positive changes to food safety culture.



Champions and coalitions should be diverse and include members from across functions and levels to represent different perspectives.



Evaluation and conversation must be ongoing alongside training and reinforcement to maintain or improve food safety culture.

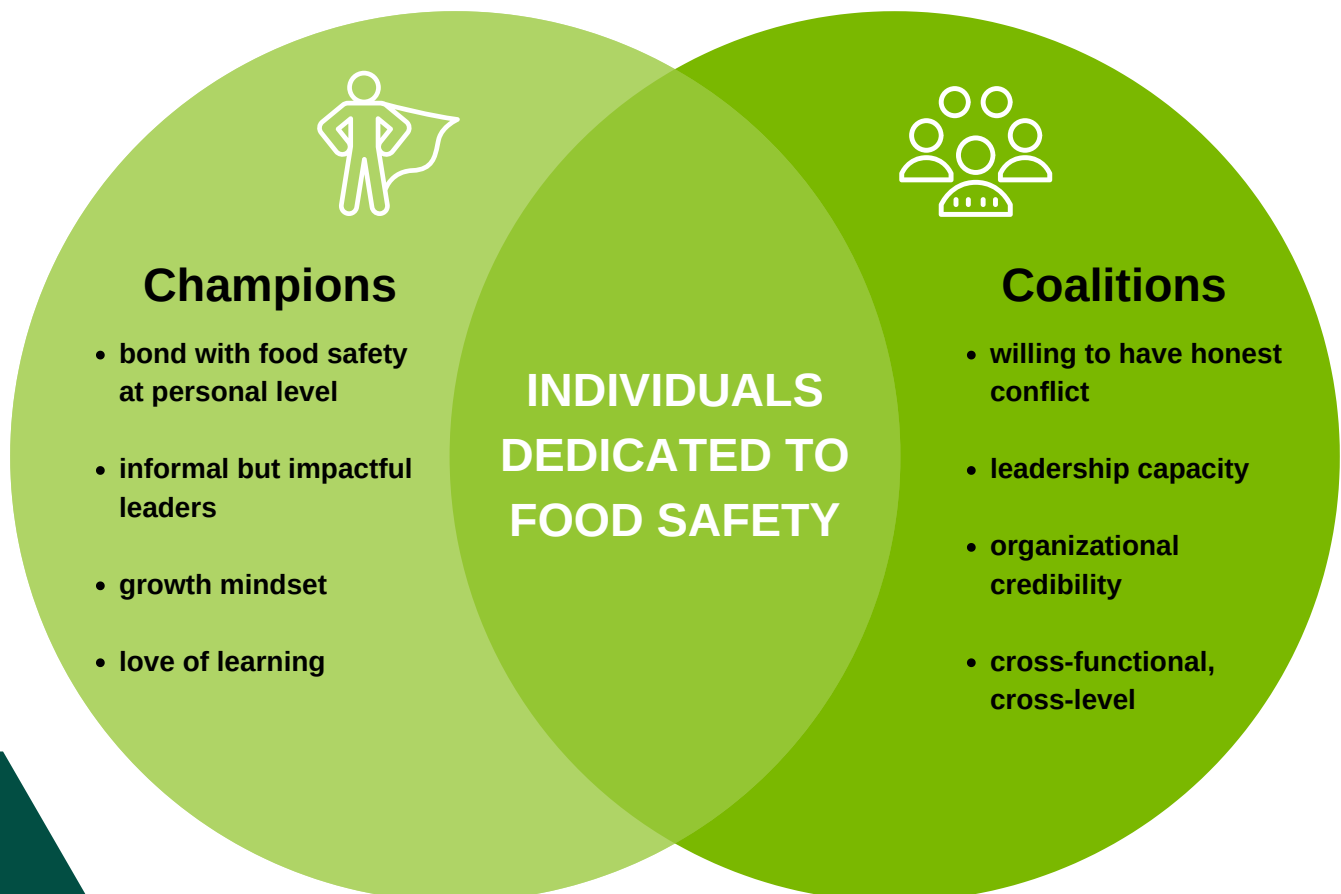


Why do champions and coalitions matter in the context of food safety culture?

Current statistics show only 30% of changes implemented to improve food safety are likely to succeed. To navigate changes more effectively, while working towards strong food safety culture, people need personal input and a sense of impact. By investing personally in the process of improving food safety culture, members of an organization are more likely to support changes and ensure they are implemented, thus helping organizations better achieve their desired results. The establishment of key food safety champions and coalitions is one way in which organizations can strengthen these personal bonds.

Food safety champions act as informal, but impactful, leaders who value learning, growth, and food safety at a deep personal level. They can recognize the need for change and wish to be an active part of implementing and promoting it.

A food safety coalition is a group of individuals with leadership capacity who are willing to engage in honest, constructive conflict to facilitate necessary changes. A coalition open to constructive conflict can harness the likely—and necessary—professional disagreements which arise to push for creative solutions. The coalition should have credibility within the organization; their actions and decisions stemming from a shared desire to strengthen food safety operations and culture.



How can we create food safety champions?

To begin fostering food safety champions within an organization, positive food safety culture must be part of the identity of the organization. All employees, from the moment they first connect with the company, need to see how important food safety is and this must continue to be a core element throughout their tenure.

Beginning with the hiring process, food safety culture should be included in job descriptions, defining the role for each individual in meeting the organization's food safety culture goals. Both hiring and onboarding should cater to the individual responsibilities of the employee and provide examples of how they will support food safety policies and culture. For example, at Blue Apron (a fresh ingredient and recipe home delivery service), new team members receive hands-on and scenario-based training, as well as the "why" of food safety. Training modules include learnings which connect new employees and their work to consumers and from day one instill the importance of assuring food safety at each step in the meal kit assembly process. The creation of food safety champions requires all new employees to embrace a service focus, where the deeply personal nature of making and shipping food that is safe to consumers is at the heart of their daily behaviors.



To foster food safety champions, positive food safety culture must be part of the identity of your organization.

To support existing food safety champions and encourage new champions to engage, employees must continue to encounter institutional support throughout their tenure. This support can and should go beyond training. Facilitating personal connections and meaningful conversations, developing approachable and compassionate team leaders, and even examining physical spaces will all contribute to fostering food safety champions.

Again drawing an example from Blue Apron, in the area where employees don gloves and hairnets, the space is structured to be highly visible and easy to maneuver from one step to the next. The design allows frontline employees to easily identify potential issues or opportunities for improvement. By creating workspaces in which issues are easily noticed and by reinforcing incentives for speaking up through recognition and support from team leaders, food safety champions are better equipped to find and communicate concerns. When all aspects of an employee's daily activities include food safety at their core, food safety champions can excel.



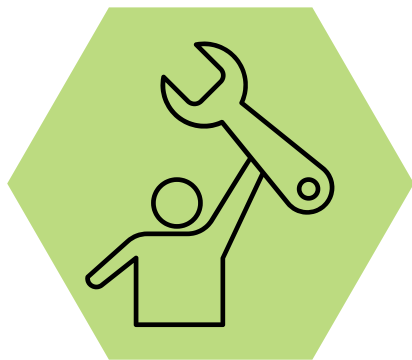
How can we create a food safety coalition?

When building a food safety coalition, solicit volunteers from across levels and diverse functions. Coalitions will be most successful during difficult conversations when they include different perspectives from throughout the organization. Individuals in different functions and at different levels will also have unique knowledge of organizational risks and realities. When the time comes for implementation of changes, the inclusion of diverse functions will aid in the messaging and further encourage all departments to have deeper engagement with food safety.

Selection of food safety coalition members should also account for the commitment necessary for such an undertaking. For example, when McKee Foods Corporation (best known for its Little Debbie brand baked goods) created their food safety coalition, they specifically identified individuals who would provide energy, leadership, and longevity to support initiatives the coalition proposed. Participation was also voluntary, not an obligation. By doing so, employees' willingness to participate was much greater and attitudes towards the coalition generally more positive than if coalition members had been forced onto the team.

The best individuals for a coalition are those who: 1) want to take an active role in improving food safety culture; 2) have the bandwidth to devote to discussions and action items; and 3) are already credible leaders within their teams.

FOOD SAFETY COALITION MEMBERS



Active Improvers



Available Bandwidth

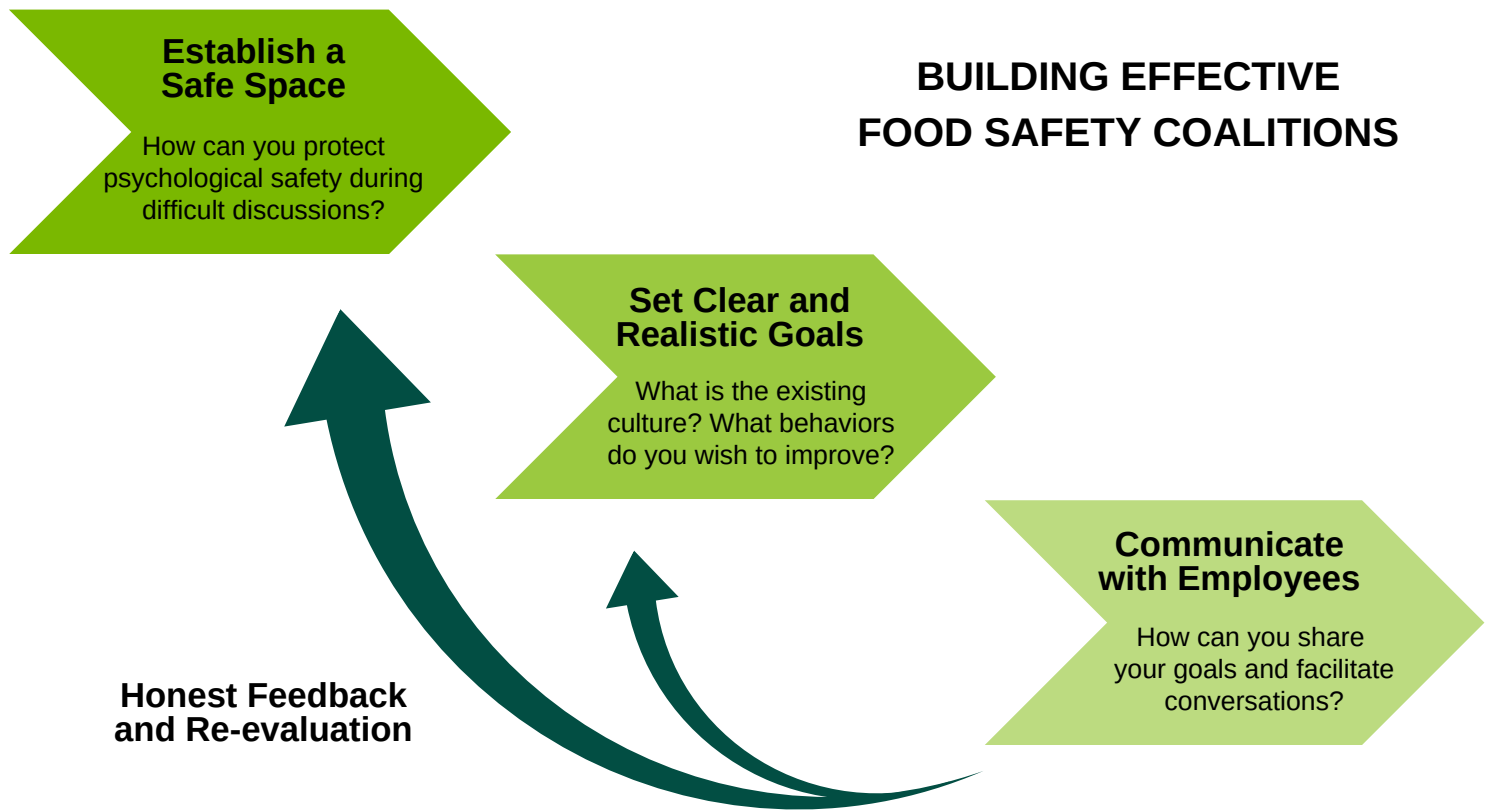


Credible Leaders

As with any new team, a newly-formed coalition must establish trust in order to be effective. Create a safe space within the coalition for individuals to express concerns, ask questions, and propose solutions. McKee's coalition spent several early meetings establishing an environment of psychological safety and creating opportunities to discuss the "undiscussables" around culture and behavior. The team identified ground rules for communication and agreed to hold one another accountable for following those rules. Development of such trust and ground rules will allow for the full engagement of participants and for the conversations needed to affect real change.



With the food safety coalition well-established, it can begin developing goals and objectives aligned to the needs of the organization. For McKee, their coalition recognized over time a need to reevaluate their goals, which had been too results oriented. The coalition refocused instead on looking deeper into the company's existing food safety culture by assessing current behaviors and identifying ways to improve upon them. Using a food safety maturity model, the coalition met with employees throughout the organization and facilitated conversations. After these conversations, the coalition observed better communication between frontline employees and team leaders, and employees were better able to identify ways their behaviors could help or hurt food safety within the organization. This ongoing cycle of feedback, re-evaluation, and renewed goal setting is essential to the success of any food safety coalition.



How do we support champions and coalitions?

Food safety champions and coalitions are only as strong as the organizational support for their efforts. The inclusion of food safety as a core value for all employees from hiring and beyond; organizational systems which allow, encourage, and reward speaking up; and safe spaces which reinforce trust across all levels and functions are critical to developing and engaging strong champions and building effective coalitions.

Acknowledgments

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Dale Estep, Food Safety & Quality Assurance Manager, McKee Foods Corporation

Ellison Beasley, Corporate Food Safety Scientist, McKee Foods Corporation

Charlean Gmunder, Chief Operating Officer, Blue Apron

We are grateful for their contributions and for sharing their stories as we all work towards stronger, more positive food safety culture throughout the food industry.

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Disclaimer: This document summarizes discussions by participants in a webinar that took place on May 18, 2022, as well as best practices identified by participants related to organizational and food safety culture. This document reflects the views of the authors and should not be construed to represent FDA's views or policies.



Interested in learning more about cultivating a positive food safety culture?

Sign up for the Alliance's Food Safety Culture Toolkit:
<https://stopfoodborneillness.org/alliance-to-stop-foodborne-illness/#toolkit-register>

View the joint FDA / Alliance Food Safety Culture Webinar Series:
<https://www.youtube.com/@alliancetostopfoodborneillness>