

FOOD SAFETY CULTURE

MEASURE WHAT YOU TREASURE: ASSESSING FOOD SAFETY CULTURE

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In Brief

Assessing food safety culture is a crucial and ongoing process for organizations to strive for continuous improvement in food safety practices. Assessments help evaluate current systems, behaviors, and attitudes around food safety and can drive decision-making for the future. Assessments should incorporate a holistic approach by including both system and behavioral data. Organizations may require different metrics and assessment approaches depending on their stage of food safety culture maturity. Data collection methods can vary, from integrating measurements into existing systems to conducting employee surveys and gathering stakeholder feedback. The frequency of assessments can also vary. Assessments must be followed by action to address opportunities for improvement and maintain strengths. Involving team members from different levels and functions of an organization in discussions about assessment results and improvement plans can increase buy-in and encourage informed decisions. Ultimately, the goal is to gain a better understanding of the current food safety culture in an organization to develop and maintain a stronger, more positive, and more mature culture in the future.

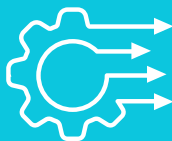
Key Learnings



Regular assessment of food safety culture can evaluate current systems, behaviors, and attitudes and drive future decision making.



Types of data and methods of collecting and organizing data will vary based on an organization's needs and current food safety culture maturity.



Assessments should be followed by action informed by the results of data collection and analysis.



Clear communication with employees about data collection, results, and next steps can increase buy-in and engagement in continuous improvement efforts.



Measure What You Treasure

A food safety culture journey is an ongoing process of striving for continuous improvement and against the entropic forces of complacency, crisis, and change. Creating and maintaining a strong, positive food safety culture requires intentional planning, evaluation, and action. Assessment, the collection and analysis of data, can help evaluate current systems, behaviors, and attitudes and drive future decision making. In addition, while we may intuitively believe a mature food safety culture positively correlates with food safety outcomes, data and analysis on that relationship is scant. Regular, comprehensive assessment and data collection can help build a framework of solid evidence to show that strong, positive cultures do, in fact, tie to desired outcomes (e.g., fewer recalls, fewer near misses). A better understanding of this relationship can help inform how we approach food safety and food safety culture both within individual organizations and across the industry.

What do we assess?

Measuring food safety culture can seem daunting. Culture is grounded in people's underlying beliefs; gathering quantifiable information about those beliefs, however, can be difficult. Assessment of food safety culture can, and should, be holistic, incorporating systems and behavior data and analyses which can help put people's beliefs into the larger context. System performance data can include key performance indicators such as the results of audits and environmental monitoring programs or the number of customer complaints received. Behavioral data can include observations, focus groups, and Gemba walks. Data can also be from both internal and external sources. For example, TreeHouse Foods, a producer of private label foods and beverages, and McDonald's, a multinational fast-food chain, both utilize data from external sources such as quality metrics (e.g., customer complaints and inquiries), third party reviews, and social media impressions. Combining different metrics creates a fuller picture of an organization's food safety culture.



Systems



Behaviors



Beliefs



The specific metrics used in a food safety culture assessment will not be one-size-fits-all, and the assessment tools will also vary. Depending on an organization's stage of food safety culture maturity, different data and assessment tools will be more useful or less useful in driving improvements. For example, an organization in reactive stages of food safety culture will benefit from the use of audit findings, completion and verification metrics, and training and compliance data.

Alternatively, an organization in the predictive stages of food safety culture will benefit more from risk analysis reviews, external horizon scanning, and cost of poor quality metrics. While all of the aforementioned data and more may be available to an organization regardless of its stage of food safety maturity, adapting an assessment to suit the organization will help you understand your landscape and consciously inform ways to encourage desired changes or behaviors.

How do we assess?

Because a company's food safety culture assessment can incorporate a variety of metrics, the methods of collecting and compiling that information will also differ.

One method of collecting and organizing data is to integrate food safety culture metrics into pre-existing organizational systems. For example, TreeHouse Foods has made food safety and quality culture part of the company's operational continuous improvement activities. Similarly, McDonald's structures food safety culture assessment within their existing "three-legged stool" model of corporate, owner-operator, and supplier goals and metrics. The use of these large, organization-wide systems provides insights into food safety culture while also reinforcing food safety as a core value across the company.



Adapting assessments to suit the organization will help you understand your landscape and consciously encourage desired changes or behaviors.

Another common method of collecting data is to conduct employee surveys to solicit feedback. TreeHouse Foods uses surveys to feel the pulse of employees across the company regarding food safety culture. To ensure honest participation in surveys and feedback opportunities, TreeHouse Foods emphasizes anonymity. Surveys are kept wholly anonymous, and messaging around them clarifies and supports that anonymity, so all employees feel safe to answer truthfully.

Assessment without action is fruitless. If an organization has invested time and effort to collect and analyze data, the next step is to take action.



The frequency of assessment will also vary depending on organizational needs and structure. McDonald's performs a full food safety culture assessment every three years, but in the interim they collect yearly data on suppliers', distributors', and franchisees' culture, resource allocation, and training at all legs and levels. The triennial assessment provides a comprehensive understanding of strengths and areas for improvement, while the yearly assessments provide opportunities for best practice sharing and creative innovation.

By blending diverse data sources and data collection and analysis methods, organizations can build an approach to assessment which works best for them to understand the current state of their food safety culture and evaluate possibilities for the future.

Treasure What You Measure

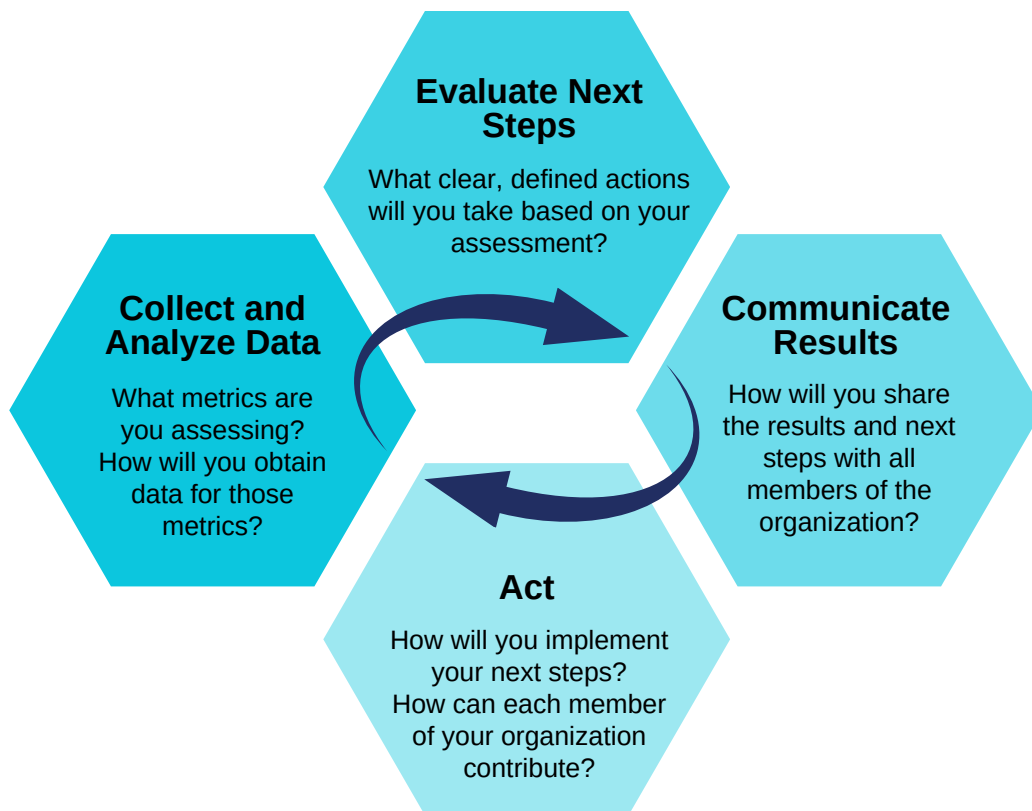
Assessment without action is fruitless. If an organization has invested time and effort to collect and analyze data, the next step is to take action. Based on an evaluation of the data, consider where food safety culture is strong and where there are opportunities for improvement. Action is then necessary to maintain or grow identified strengths and to address assessed opportunities for improvement.

Assessments which highlight opportunities for improvement—or even failures—can be invaluable resources if action follows. At TreeHouse Foods, if an assessment finds an issue with the adoption of strong, positive food safety culture behaviors or mindsets, they use root cause analysis to identify where the process may have broken down. By parsing the issues found in assessment and identifying the pitfalls which led to those issues, the company can make changes to better approach the identified challenges in the future. Likewise, McDonald's organizes areas for improvement within and across the three legs of their organization, using a Venn diagram to highlight where opportunities overlap and where changes will be most influential.



Including team members from across levels and functions in the discussion of assessment results can enhance organizational support for improvement efforts. If an organization has a coalition of food safety culture champions (see our whitepaper “Building a Coalition of Food Safety Champions”), they can provide insights towards next steps. Sharing the results of assessments and plans for improvement with the employees who helped provide the data allows them to see how their input is used to improve the organization. Seeing steps taken based on collective feedback can increase buy-in from employees for future surveys because they see a return on their efforts. In addition, knowing the results of an assessment can help team members make conscious, informed decisions to advance food safety. For example, when McDonald’s introduced food safety culture questions to their yearly audit of a supplier, they did not score those specific questions of audit but instead used it as a basis for discussion around measuring and modeling strong, positive food safety culture. In the same way a practice test helps a student prepare a study schedule, this approach allowed suppliers to use the assessment data as they work to enhance their food safety culture.

THE CYCLE OF ASSESSMENT



Regardless of where an organization is in their food safety culture journey, assessment is a critical part of planning, evaluating, and acting towards continuous improvement. Metrics and methods will vary for every organization, but the ultimate goal is the same for all: a better understanding of food safety culture in the present to develop and maintain stronger, more positive, and more mature food safety culture in the future.

Acknowledgments

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Hany Sidrak, DVM, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Office of Field Operations Food Safety and Inspection Services, USDA

Brian Perry, Senior Vice President, Chief Safety Officer, TreeHouse Foods

Karleigh Bacon, Director US Supply Chain Food Safety, Science, and Regulatory, McDonald's Corporation

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 11, 2023, 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 or USDA'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>