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Assessing Food Safety Culture: Selecting Methods and Communicating Insights

As food safety professionals, recognizing the importance of both food safety culture and effective communication is crucial

By Lone Jespersen, Ph.D., Founder and Principal, Cultivate SA; Shingai Nyarugwe, Ph.D., Lecturer in Food Safety Management, University of Central Lancashire and Project Lead, Cultivate SA; and Bob Lijana, M.Sc., Editor in Chief, Cultivate SA

The interaction between food safety culture and communication plays a pivotal role in building trust and fostering organizational success. A robust food safety culture promotes good practices and provides a foundation for compelling stories that highlight your accomplishments, ultimately strengthening stakeholder confidence.

Choosing the most suitable method for assessing your food safety culture can be challenging. In this article, we offer seven questions to consider when selecting a method, and discuss how to choose one that aligns with your organization's maturity level in food safety culture.

Effective communication is a vital aspect of a strong food safety culture, enabling you to share your food safety successes with employees, customers, and regulators. By integrating communication strategies into your food safety practices, you can improve transparency, raise awareness, and contribute to a safer and more reliable food environment.

The authors' organization provides various tools to assess and enhance food safety culture while sharing best practices for communication among food safety professionals. The insights in this article are based on validated best practices and a roundtable discussion at the Food Safety Summit in May 2024, featuring experts like Mark Beaumont, Vice President of Quality and Food Safety Standards and Risk Management at Danone; Andrew Clarke, Senior Director of Quality Assurance at Loblaw Companies Ltd.; Janet Riley, Owner and

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President at Janet Riley Strategies; and Lone Jespersen, Founder and Principal at Cultivate SA. Their valuable input has helped shape the guidance shared here.

As food safety professionals, recognizing the importance of both food safety culture and effective communication is crucial. By embracing this integrated approach, we can foster trust, drive continuous improvement, and ensure the safety of our food supply for future generations.

Communication, Business Risk, and Culture

Food safety culture can be defined as values, norms, and beliefs that are repeated regularly within a group. Strong and effective communication, both internal and external, can support these and create effective culture and food safety habits. The culture and food safety habits can, in turn, support effective communication.

Research on the impact of poor communication on business risks reveals significant consequences. Key findings include:

- **Financial impact:** A study by SHRM¹ estimates that companies with poor communication suffer losses averaging \$62.4 million annually due to factors such as decreased productivity, increased employee turnover, and missed business opportunities.
- **Employee engagement:** Gallup data² reveals that organizations with poor communication practices have lower employee engagement levels, leading to increased absenteeism, higher turnover rates, and reduced productivity.
- **Reputation risk:** Poor communication, particularly during a crisis, can severely damage a company's reputation. A Weber Shandwick study³ shows that 60 percent of a company's market value depends on its reputation, emphasizing the importance of effective communication in maintaining public trust and credibility.
- **Project failure:** PMI reports⁴ that ineffective communication is a primary contributor to project failures, with 56 percent of unsuccessful projects being attributed to communication breakdowns.

Much research indicates that poor communication can significantly increase business risks and negatively affect the organization. Consequently, investing in effective communication strategies is crucial for mitigating potential risks and fostering sustainable growth. These are all part of food safety culture.

Strengths and Weaknesses in FSQA Leadership Communication

Janet Riley, one of our esteemed co-presenters, has developed a pioneering methodology to evaluate communication effectiveness among food safety professionals. This innovative approach, known as the "Riley Method," was introduced during the 2024 Food Safety Summit. Participants in the session had the opportunity to engage in a real-time assessment of their communication strengths and weaknesses.

The Riley Method consists of a series of 12 questions designed to gauge an individual's confidence and effectiveness when discussing food safety matters with internal and external stakeholders. Participants rate each topic on a scale of 1 to 10, enabling them to compare their average scores with those of their peers and identify areas for improvement. This assessment tool benefits not only individual professionals but also contributes to strengthening a company's food safety culture as a whole.

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During a session at the 2024 Food Safety Summit, 79 participants utilized the Riley Method to assess their personal communication capabilities. The topics that received the lowest and highest scores provide valuable insights into the communication strengths and challenges faced by food safety professionals (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. Lowest and Highest Scoring Communication Characteristics

Clearly, speaking with confidence to people outside the company is a big challenge for food safety professionals. By contrast, food safety professionals seem to be much more comfortable speaking to their own colleagues, and modeling that behavior to them.

Food Safety Culture Assessments and Communication of Insights

Assessing and prioritizing food safety are vital in demonstrating a business's commitment to maintaining high standards. However, biases and assumptions associated with these assessments can inadvertently hinder progress and waste valuable resources. Understanding your organization's maturity stage and fostering effective communication with stakeholders can help change this trajectory. This is especially helpful when you link the two (maturity and communication).

Two key aspects play a critical role in driving successful food safety assessments and fostering a culture of continuous improvement in communication effectiveness:

- **One, maturity stage awareness:** Assessing your organization's current stage of maturity is crucial. For instance, if the food safety and quality assurance (FSQA) leader is the sole driver of assessments, then your business may be at an early stage (1 or 2). At this point, a survey can provide insights into your organization's culture at the highest level—what your teams see and hear from leaders. As you progress to higher maturity stages, focus on deeper aspects such as the assumptions and beliefs of individuals and groups.
- **Two, transparent communication:** Ensuring that you and your stakeholders understand what to expect from assessments is essential. Engage with internal stakeholders before and after assessments, tailoring your approach to your organization's maturity stage.

Involving stakeholders in setting expectations for survey participation, discussing insights, and visually representing your food safety culture can promote transparency and shared goals. Using tools like storytelling (more to come) to relay these narratives to inspectors and auditors can further showcase your dedication to food safety.

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Ensuring that the assessment tools used are valid and reliable becomes important. This is because insights drawn from these tools not only determine the trustworthiness of your findings, but also demonstrate rigor and provide assurance in the inferences made and the decision-making. In the journey of food safety culture improvement, you might consider using a survey to gain insights into your food safety culture. However, as you progress to more mature stages, it is richer to focus on method triangulation, data source integration, and machine learning, where it becomes more about predictive analysis. You also need to consider whether relevant data is being collected and whether this data focuses on performance areas that are key to your company’s success. Instead of collecting data that are not fully utilized, it becomes more about the insights and how these drive and sustain improvement.

Some of the key questions to ask are listed below and further detailed in Table 1:

1. What is the purpose of the assessment?
2. Which company-specific objectives related to food safety performance, behavior, and risks are important for the assessment?
3. Which key insights do you need to draw on?
4. What are the key indicators related to performance, risk, and behaviors?
5. Who are the findings being communicated to?
6. Which is the most relevant assessment tool?
7. How do we interpret the data?

Maturity Stage	1	2	3	4	5
Most common assessment methods by maturity stage				Data integration	
			Focus groups and Interviews		
		Document analysis			
	Surveys				
What can you expect to learn from this assessment?	A measure of the top of the culture pyramid—what your teams see and hear from leaders.	A measure of norms as described; for example, in food safety meeting minutes and near-misses.	Insights into how people would describe the organization, in current or aspirational terms.	Potential correlations between human resources, people safety, and food safety performance and behaviors.	Potential predictive models based on company-specific food safety risks and behaviors.
What to ask to make sure you get valid insights?	Design surveys to obtain accurate results that genuinely reflect the intended measurement objectives. This ensures that the data collected is reliable, valid, and ultimately supports informed decision-making.	Select the relevant documents, information, data, and appropriate indicators that provide relevant insights. Insights obtained should be reliable, valid, and support decision-making.	Design the focus groups and interviews to elicit insights that reflect intended measurement objectives.	Identify appropriate data sources and analyze the data to draw valid and reliable insights. This goes beyond the qualitative and quantitative data collected toward statistical analysis and interpretation that is easily understood.	Incorporate machine learning to ensure continuous measurement and insights into performance and potential company-specific risks.
What are common communication methods?	Memo from CEO and FSQA lead.	FSQA leads engagement of plant leadership.	Cascading insights across functional groups by functional leaders, shared in meetings.	Integration in tiered structure and continuous improvement rhythms, shared in meetings, posters, and corporate communications.	Insights shared across function and levels, to all other functions and levels.

TABLE 1. Food Safety Culture Assessment Methods and Communication in Relation to Food Safety Culture Maturity Stages

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Prioritizing clear communication and understanding your organization's maturity stage are crucial factors in overcoming biases, optimizing assessment investments, and fostering continuous improvement in food safety practices. To gain a deeper understanding of maturity stages, the authors recommend referring to the Cultivate Maturity Model.⁵

Analyzing the audience assessments conducted during the Food Safety Summit session reveals that as a company's food safety maturity level increases, so does the quality of data obtained through assessment methods. Consequently, the organization's confidence in addressing and communicating risks to external audiences also improves.

To effectively manage biases, it is essential to consider the incorporation of psychosocial factors in your chosen assessment methods. These factors, which include workload, time constraints, and clarity of goals, represent the control, support, and environment experienced by a company's leaders and team members as a direct function of their organization's culture. Psychosocial factors can impact decision-making related to food safety risks and influence how well a company communicates these risks.

By selecting a food safety culture assessment method that aligns with your organization's current maturity level, you can better demonstrate progress, meet stakeholder expectations, and drive continuous improvement in your food safety practices. Investing in clear communication and understanding your organization's maturity stage is the key to overcoming biases, making informed decisions, and fostering a robust food safety culture.

Tools to Improve Your Communication of Food Safety Risks

You can use communication best practices to communicate food safety risks and how they are being effectively handled by your company, as discussed below.

Clear and Confident Storytelling

One of the most effective ways to communicate important information is through the telling of stories. This is much more effective than just sharing facts or the message itself. Why? Because there is a *science* to storytelling! Storytelling causes cognitive engagement on the part of the listener. Our brains are designed to process information in narrative form. Stories engage multiple areas of the brain, making content more memorable and relatable. Storytelling also helps with data retention. Information presented within a story is more likely to be remembered than data presented in a straightforward format.

Storytelling has a significant impact on decision-making. Stories appealing to both logic and emotion can guide individuals toward a desired and preferred outcome. For storytelling ideas, check out the STOP Foodborne Illness whitepaper and webinar.⁶

Storytelling activates the brain's "mirror neurons," prompting empathy with the people in the story and fostering a sense of connection. Finally, storytelling that includes emotions can trigger the release of oxytocin, which enhances trust and bonding with the storyteller.

Communicating Risks—Known and Anticipated

A major reason for building a culture that fosters effective communication is so that communication patterns, behaviors, and techniques are well-muscled and practiced.

Having a robust and reliable communication program—and individuals who can execute it—provides a rigor and resilience that can confidently be relied upon in uncertain times. It

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is challenging enough to communicate the right food safety messages for known risks (e.g., potential foreign material contamination of finished product); however, for emerging risks (e.g., PFAS in food and livestock), there is likely no proven or fixed plan for communicating how these risks might be handled. Too much is in flux, or not even known.

Staying ahead of emerging risks is a cost of doing business. To that end, food companies must proactively provide resources to assess and address risks. These actions should include engaging outside experts, monitoring actions in the regulatory environment, and tracking best practice changes in industry. Companies must also make sure that the right processes and systems are in place to ensure continuity of business operations.

On the subject of risks—it is important to keep in mind that not all hazards are actually risks to the business. A good HACCP plan distinguishes a hazard from a risk. Cogent risk analysis separates the hazards that may be effectively ignored from the risks that require active management, measurement, and control. Understanding this difference helps set communication priorities.⁷

Since risks can “outrun” regulations, it is important to inform and educate stakeholders on emerging hazards and risks, let them know that you care (an especially important message to consumers), and share what can be done. The latter includes contributing to scientific and regulatory learning on an emerging risk, adapting and improving control measures, and taking a proactive and informed position to address potential consumer concerns.

“Instead of being overly concerned with internal politics or negative reactions, companies should prioritize sharing accurate and transparent information about risks and empowering employees to take appropriate action.”

An article in the *Harvard Business Review*⁸ offers valuable insights that can be applied within food companies to improve risk management and communication. The authors emphasize the importance of equipping stakeholders with accurate and useful information to empower them to make informed decisions.

Three key suggestions can be applied in food companies to foster a culture of trust and informed decision-making, ultimately leading to more effective risk management:

1. Shift focus from avoiding negative outcomes to providing accurate and useful information. Instead of being overly concerned with internal politics or negative reactions, companies should prioritize sharing accurate and transparent information about risks and empowering employees to take appropriate action.
2. Reframe uncertainty. Uncertainty is inherent in many risk situations; however, by transparently communicating the nature and extent of the uncertainty, companies can help employees understand and manage risks more effectively.
3. Measure success based on stakeholder empowerment. Rather than gauging success

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solely on the absence of negative outcomes, companies should measure how well stakeholders can manage risks. This approach encourages a proactive and informed risk management culture.

Direct, Informed, and Decisive Decision-Making

It is critical to use science as a guide when evaluating risks. Emerging risks evolve as more scientific information becomes available. Understanding this process is called “progressive insights,” and it will provide support for relevant risk mitigation measures.

This utilization of knowledge guides the determination of a risk/benefit analysis for the business. From this analysis, decisions about required actions can be made or, importantly, decisions about not taking action. It could be that there is a need for more information and data first.

Once a decision is made (including for delayed action), it should be communicated clearly that the assessment is meant to protect the consumer, even if this would entail significant negative business impact.

Communicating Top to Front

The above principles apply to both internal and external communication. The latter addresses the underlying gaps identified in the 2024 Food Safety Summit survey discussed earlier. Equally important is building communication “muscle” internally. This is critical to the continual improvement of the company’s food safety culture. A well-oiled communication machine within the company makes it easier to handle external communications.

Decisions made and communicated within the company are “the shadow that you cast.” Said another way, the decisions reflect upon you and your company.

How might internal communication skills be enhanced and leveraged? By visualizing the role modeling needed, you can develop procedures, techniques, and cadences that cascade throughout the company. These should flow from senior leaders to frontline team members (“top to front”). Cultivate SA has seen over and over how role modeling (e.g., being on the floor, doing Gemba walks) correlates positively with food safety performance. The more walks taken, the better are food safety practices (e.g., adherence to Good Manufacturing Practices), and the more comments and questions come from team members.

Here are some helpful steps to model communicating top to front:

1. Identify the best approach for communicating
2. Interpret any needed data clearly to ensure value
3. Summarize—use short words and avoid jargon
4. Provide a solution or two to an identified issue or question
5. Be ready for an alternative outcome—be flexible
6. Repeat.

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Taking Action Tomorrow

Strengthening your organization's food safety culture begins with understanding your current maturity stage and prioritizing effective communication. Take the crucial first step by assessing your company's communication strengths and weaknesses using proven methodologies, such as the Riley Method. By identifying areas for improvement and addressing potential biases, you can drive continuous progress and foster a safer, more transparent food environment.

To ensure the success of your food safety initiatives, make an informed decision about your assessment methods and choose one that aligns with your organization's maturity level. By doing so, you will not only enhance your ability to communicate risks effectively, but also meet stakeholder expectations and contribute to the overall improvement of the food industry's safety standards.

By evaluating your organization's communication practices today, you will pave the way for a stronger, more reliable food safety culture! To get started, first form an opinion of the food safety maturity stage of your company. This may start with a simple consensus of your leadership team. This should quickly evolve into using a validated and proven assessment method.

And remember, it's not what you tell them, but how you make them feel! ■

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Lone Jespersen, Ph.D. is a published author, speaker, and the Principal and Founder of Cultivate SA, a Switzerland-based organization dedicated to eradicating foodborne illness, one culture at a time. Dr. Jespersen has worked with improving food safety through organizational culture improvements for 20 years, since she started at Maple Leaf Foods in 2004. She chaired the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) technical working group A Culture of Food Safety, chaired the International Association of Food Protection (IAFP) professional development group Food Safety Culture, and was the technical author on the BSI PAS320 Practical Guide to Food Safety Culture. Dr. Jespersen holds a Ph.D. in Culture Enabled Food Safety from the University of Guelph in Canada and a master's degree in Mechanical Engineering from Syd Dansk University in Denmark. She is a visiting Professor at the University of Central Lancashire in the UK. Dr. Jespersen serves as Chair of the IFPTI board and as Director on the Stop Foodborne Illness board. She is also a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of Food Safety Magazine and a member of the Educational Advisory Board of the Food Safety Summit.

Shingai Nyarugwe, Ph.D. is a Lecturer in Food Safety Management at the University of Central Lancashire and a Project Lead at Cultivate SA. She is a food safety expert who holds an M.Sc. degree in Food Quality Management and a Ph.D. in Food Safety Culture. Her experience cuts across agricultural processing, the food and beverage industry (particularly dairy processing, bakery, meat processing, and beverage processing) and food packaging, where she has held roles in research, quality assurance, and production.

Bob Lijana, M.Sc. has held director- and VP-level positions in food safety, quality, and operations for over 35 years at companies producing ready-to-eat foods, prepared meals, and pasteurized juices. He has a B.Sc. and an M.Sc. in chemical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of California–Berkeley, respectively.