Appendix 11: Food safety culture

'Food safety culture' is about attitudes, behaviours and the priority given to food safety in an organisation. In a food business, it is how everyone (owners, managers, employees) thinks and acts in their daily job to make sure the business's food is safe. In a strong food safety culture, people take both responsibility and care in producing safe food. They understand the importance of making safe food and the consequences of things going wrong. People have the right knowledge and skills and a genuine commitment to doing things the right way, every time.

Food safety culture starts at the top but needs support from everyone across the business. It includes not only food handlers, but also people involved in cleaning, maintenance, purchases, recruitment and other activities, as they contribute to the business's food safety and culture too.

Why is food safety culture important?

In Australia, people expect to enjoy their food with the assurance it is safe to eat. A good food safety culture in your business can protect:

- consumers from illnesses and death from unsafe food
- your brand's reputation
- your business from financial loss.

Preventable problems

Each year in Australia there are approximately:

- 4.7 million cases of foodborne illness, with contaminated food causing about 47,900 hospitalisations and 38 deaths
- 80 food recalls, mostly due to contamination by disease-causing microorganisms or allergens that were not listed on the label.

It's clear that despite having legislation, standards, quality assurance programs and other food safety systems in place, sometimes things go wrong. Problems with unsafe food have been linked to poor hygiene practices or mistakes by people handling food and equipment, even when people are trained and businesses are inspected and audited. These problems are largely preventable, if there is a strong food safety culture in the business.

People are the key to food safety systems working properly. After all, it is people who make the decisions, handle the food, use and maintain equipment and clean things up.

Where to start

The table on the next page shows the basic components of a good food safety culture. You can improve your business's food safety culture through three steps:

1. Know – know what your business's food safety culture is (e.g. assess it with a survey)
2. Do – do something to improve the culture (e.g. improve communications on food safety, allocate funding for equipment); even small steps can make a difference
3. Follow through – monitor food safety progress and commit to continually improving.

FSANZ has some useful resources for food businesses and regulators - visit www.foodstandards.gov.au (see our Food safety culture section).

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What does a strong food safety culture look like?

	What?	How? (examples)
Strong leadership	*Senior leaders show the way, openly commit to making safe food the top priority throughout the business*	I make sure there is a regular meeting or get-together where we report and discuss our food safety performance. I personally follow up on things we decided need to be done (e.g. assign time, people or money to specific tasks, make sure corrective actions are done). I review our food safety performance and budget with my team as part of our overall business performance at least once a month.
Committed managers	*Managers show their commitment to food safety through dedicating time and effort*	I exemplify best practice food safety when working in my business. I communicate and follow up on my expectation that all staff spend 10 minutes each week in team meetings discussing and solving our food safety challenges. I schedule and lead a regular event (e.g. team meeting, webinar, safety demonstration) where I personally speak to my teams about food safety. I make sure my leadership team discusses and acts on suggestions about improving food safety at least monthly.
Everyone contributes	*Everyone in the business believes making safe food is important and everyone plays a part*	I speak up and correct anyone's behaviour if I see something wrong. I offer suggestions I think could improve the business's food safety performance. I ask questions if I don't understand why food safety practices are changed.
Everyone's accountable	*Everyone understands that they are held responsible for ensuring food is safe*	I understand my role and responsibilities in food safety and that if I do not take them seriously consumers could become ill or die and the business could be harmed. I help new colleagues and share my pride in what our business expects and achieves when it comes to food safety.
Knowing and acting right	*More than training – making sure everyone knows the risks and does the right thing, every time*	I assign time and budget for staff to receive food safety training, as well as regular updates or refresher sessions. I make sure there is a plan for everybody to be involved in food safety observations (e.g. food temperature, equipment sanitation), so we are all checking that we know and do what is expected. I actively encourage and reward people/ teams who have shown a strong commitment to food safety. I always speak up and/or take action if I see something is wrong (e.g. a food safety observation).
Continual improvement	*Be proactive – monitor what goes on, look for ways to improve, prevent problems happening in the future*	I discuss findings from food safety observations with my team at a pre-set and regular time so we can find better ways to do things and remove obstacles. I am encouraged to bring ideas about improving food safety to my supervisor and often do this. I see my supervisor and the business as a whole taking my comments and suggestions seriously – this makes me feel proud and valued.