

Food safety culture

The competence of our employees consists not only of knowledge and skills, but also of correct behavior. Despite good machines and software systems, employee behavior is central for safe food products. Proper employee behavior is the foundation of a good food safety culture. Therefore, a good food safety culture is important to avoid recalls.

Almost simultaneously, the concept of food safety culture appeared in 2020 in the revision of Codex Alimentarius (CXC 1-1969, General Principles of Food Safety) and in the revisions of the GFSI standards (FSSC 22000, IFS, BRC). This term was then adopted by the EU in food hygiene law in 2021 (EU Regulation 2021/382). It is only a matter of time before Swiss legislation will follow.

Food safety culture is a focus to the human beings. This means that despite good machines and software systems, the behavior of employees is central to produce safe food products. Proper employee behavior is at the core of a good food safety culture.

Because correct behavior is also important when it comes to food quality, environmental protection and occupational safety, the food safety culture must be embedded in the company culture.

When starting out in working life, many people think: 80% of errors are of technical origin and 20% are of human origin. As your career progresses, you realize that no, it's the other way around. 80% of errors are of human origin, 20% are of technical origin.

Our image of the human being is that we assume no one wants to do a bad job. Mistakes happen to normal people during normal working hours. This means that root causes can be unclear responsibilities, communication errors, incorrect behavior, etc.

In the food business, we not only want to set standards, but we also want them to be followed. As an example, let's take a traffic standard that everyone knows, the speed sign 60. (See Figure 1) Experience shows that 50% of road users follow this standard and do not drive more than 60 km per hour. 49% will adopt this standard if they are convinced that it is necessary (city traffic, bad weather, etc.). 1% will ignore the signal out of principle. I call this population the criminals.

What does that mean for us? When it comes to standards, employees have to be trained and convinced. Anyone who does not comply with this must be confronted with appropriate measures, just like in road traffic.

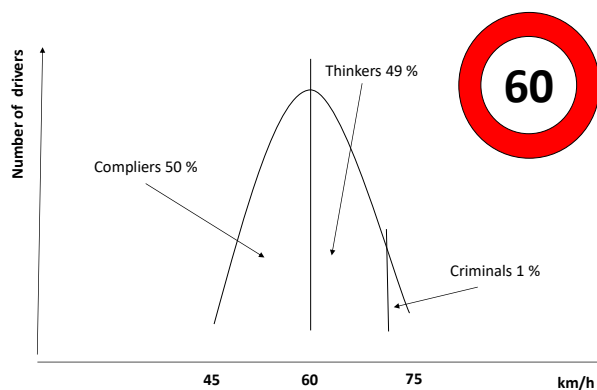


Figure 1: Violation of a Standard

Correct behavior is the basis for the company culture. It's like an iceberg. Recalls and injuries are the tip of the iceberg and are visible. The lowest layer hidden by water is the behavior of employees. Incorrect behavior influences recalls and injuries. (see Figure 2).

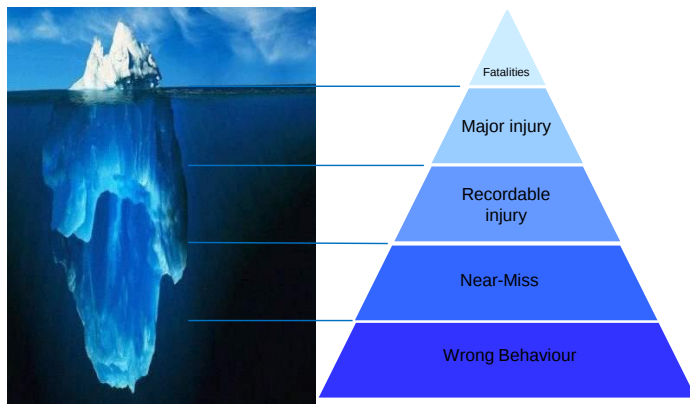


Figure 2: Fatalities are not a coincidence

Let's take an example from traffic that everyone can understand. The example is from occupational safety but the same logic applies to food safety. If a pedestrian walks past over a lonely road 10,000 times without looking, that is wrong behavior.

9,000 times this won't be a problem; 1,000 times the driver has to brake.

900 times nothing will happen, 100 times there will be a collision with the pedestrian.

90 times there are minor injuries and 10 times there are serious injuries.

9 people will survive the serious injuries, 1 person will die.

But if the pedestrian checks whether a car is coming before he starts walking, i.e. uses the right behavior, no one will die.

Recalls, injuries, accidents are not coincidences, but a statistical negative lottery win based on incorrect behavior.

The competence of our employees consists not only of their knowledge and skills, but also of the right behavior. For example, there is no point in hiring a well-trained employee with a lot of experience if they always look the other way when problems arise.

So how do we get the right employee behavior into our food business? Four areas of influencing behaviors at work are central:

Role model:

Why do I have to comply to our food safety standards when my boss doesn't either. Of course there shouldn't be such a statement. If standards exist in the company, they apply to everyone. It's also about trust in each other.

Perhaps the manager for example realizes that the standard no longer makes sense because the operational situation has changed. Then of course this standard should be changed and employees should be informed accordingly. Of course, all standards should be checked regularly to ensure they are up to date. Unfortunately, this is not the case everywhere. For example, you can see companies today where the old Corona rules are still posted.

Perhaps the supervisor notices that the resources to comply with the standard are lacking and takes the right measures. For example, hands cannot be washed if there is no soap.

Communication:

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (author of "The Little Prince") writes in his work "The City in the Desert": "If you want to build a ship, don't gather men together to get wood, assign tasks and do the work, but teach them the desire for the big, wide sea."

As technically people, we have to learn to communicate with more emotion and also show why we do something and what our end goal is. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, everyone wants to do a good job, but they need the right understanding to do so.

Training:

The biggest difference between the food industry and other industries is hygiene, maintaining cleanliness. Many of our employees come from other industries. It is therefore important to train on hygiene and food safety aspects. Every opportunity should be used to train, this maintains awareness of this issue.

Feedback culture:

You cannot "not learn". People learn all the time. The feedback from other people is very important. Positive and negative feedback is very important for food safety culture.

Good behavior can and employee misconduct must be addressed immediately. Feedback should not only come from superiors, but also from other employees. This must be learned. I have to learn how to give such feedback. Feedback should be timely, friendly, explanatory and firm.

But employees also have to learn to receive feedback. Every feedback should be received as a gift. Both positive feedback and negative feedback are a gift for those affected.

If errors have occurred, it is not about "punishing the perpetrator" but rather finding out the cause. So, it's about how we deal with mistakes and whether we learn from the mistakes.

Most of the time we have found a cause, but not the root cause. If we have not found the human component, we have not found the root cause. Examples:

- Employee was stressed and overlooked an important detail. Why? Because not enough time was planned for work.
- The employee overlooked an important detail. Why? Because he was tired from working overtime.
- The valve broke. Why? Because it was not included in the preventive maintenance and replaced in a timely manner. Etc.

If we want to achieve zero recalls, zero injuries, zero accidents, food safety culture and understanding of humans is key.

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