

# FOOD SAFETY CULTURE



## STORYTELLING TO INFORM, EDUCATE AND INFLUENCE.

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## In Brief

Storytelling is an integral tool to create positive change in the food safety system. By sharing personal stories, the audience has the ability to connect with the storyteller as complex issues faced by food workers are humanized. Storytelling can inform or educate the listener, and at its best, it should influence an individual's behavior and/or mindset. Stories that are genuine, factual, and action-oriented are the most effective, and should be carefully tailored to their target audience. Storytellers should take the time to prepare and practice. Sharing stories with brevity, impact, and emotional resonance will become more natural with time.

## Key Learnings



**Storytelling helps your audience build personal connections to the food safety actions they take**



**Stories have the power to inform, educate, and influence**



**Stories and approaches to storytelling may differ depending on the audience and desired outcome**



**Effective storytelling requires a focus on action-oriented outcomes and a feedback loop for measuring effectiveness**

## The Power of Storytelling

Storytelling can be a powerful means of engaging people with the real consequences, both positive and negative, of policies, procedures, and behaviors surrounding food safety. Personal stories build connections. These connections help concepts endure and prevent the complacency that can occur when daily actions and choices become detached from their impact on people.

Stories can be used to inform, educate, and influence. As a tool to inform, stories can present food safety facts in a larger, more engaging context. As a tool to educate, stories can instruct people not only in the appropriate actions for food safety but also connect them to why those actions matter. And finally, as a tool to influence, stories have the capacity to create changes in attitudes and behaviors which persist beyond the workplace. For example, Jorge Hernandez, Vice President of Quality Assurance for the international fast food chain Wendy's, has received phone calls years after sharing food safety stories in which people jokingly accuse him of "ruining" family gatherings. Stories of foodborne illness and the consequences of food safety choices had resonated so deeply with these listeners that they could no longer look at a holiday potluck without taking extra safety measures and encouraging loved ones to do the same.

These enduring personal connections, combined with the knowledge and understanding of food safety concepts shared in the stories, are essential to helping people make the right choices every day.

Inform



Educate



Influence

## Shaping A Story

A story does not have to fit a uniform length, style, or tone to impact food safety behaviors. In fact, selecting or adapting stories for different audiences and outcomes can be more effective than the same story told the same way.

For Jeff Almer, a constituent advocate for Stop Foodborne Illness whose mother died in 2008 of *Salmonella* in an outbreak linked to the now infamous Peanut Corporation of America (PCA), his story evolved and adapted as his goals and audiences changed. For example, when speaking to the media, Almer would craft short, memorable elements of his story into sound bites, but when speaking to an individual, such as an attorney working on the case against PCA, he would share a more complete picture of his family's experience.

The goal for the media was to create snappy moments that would elevate and widen the distribution of his story, while the goal for individuals was to influence them towards specific actions.

For instance, Jeff might share how his mother was a fighter and struggled with a years-long battle against brain cancer. This made her eventual death from foodborne illness – a sudden and completely unanticipated event that resulted from something as simple and essential as eating – that much more devastating to the family. By including details like these, Jeff was able to use specificity of information to his advantage.



In a similar way, Hernandez adapts his stories to different contexts. When working as a health inspector, he would draw comparisons for managers between publicized food safety incidents and similar issues within their own establishments, highlighting the potential consequences to their business. Working for Wendy's, when sharing a story with frontline employees, he would use stories which demonstrated the effect of foodborne illness on families, highlighting how their actions could help protect people like themselves or their loved ones. These different contexts benefited from different stories and different storytelling approaches to connect with the listeners.

In addition, stories surrounding food safety need not always be about negative consequences. Using storytelling to elevate positive examples, instances of employees taking action for food safety and demonstrating the desired behaviors and attitudes, can also be important tools in influencing others. Tying storytelling to rewards and recognition programs, telling stories of peers making good choices, and presenting the positives alongside the potential negatives creates even more opportunities for people to connect with the message.

## **Planning and Implementing Storytelling**

Implementing effective storytelling in an organization to promote desired food safety behaviors requires an understanding of the target audience, clear and action-oriented stories, and a system for feedback.

### *Know the Audience*

Conducting research about the target audience is essential to crafting a narrative which will build connections and influence behaviors. The right emotional connection coming from the right person in an organization is essential. For instance, some individuals may connect best with a story told directly by a person impacted by foodborne illness, like Almer, while others may benefit from hearing the story from a peer or a mentor.

Particularly in a very diverse workforce (with employees who speak multiple languages or come from different cultures), stories should be crafted with these differences in mind. Identifying and understanding who the target audience is will help determine which stories and methods of delivery will be most impactful.

### *Keep Stories Clear, Simple, and Action-Oriented*

Regardless of audience, stories should be clear and have a simple, action-oriented message. If a story meanders or contains more information than is necessary, listeners may disengage or even take away the wrong parts of the story. Determine the action outcomes of the story: what behavior do you want people to adopt or change after hearing it? The story can then follow a path to those outcomes. For example, when Hernandez, working as a health inspector, shared a story with a restaurant manager, he specifically cited the temperature "danger zone" and a few key methods the manager could use to avoid it when cooling a sauce. Hernandez even provided a thermometer for the manager to use as he tested those methods. The clear, action-oriented message of Hernandez's story provided the manager with next-steps he could easily follow to help prevent foodborne illness.

## Action-Oriented Storytelling

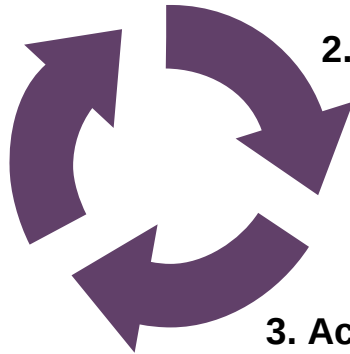


What do you want your audience to walk away with? How do you hope to impact their behavior?

### Create a Feedback Loop

Storytelling, as with food safety culture itself, benefits from a system of continuous feedback and improvement. Building on the example in the previous paragraph, when Hernandez gave the restaurant manager directions for cooling sauce without letting it sit in the “danger zone,” he not only provided feedback, but also opened the door to an ongoing conversation about different cooling methods. The manager called and explained what did and did not work, and Hernandez then knew his story had been effective and the connection between the manager and food safety established.

1. Gather Feedback



2. Analyze Feedback

3. Act on Insights

Creating a **system for feedback** and measuring the **effectiveness** of a story can help inform future storytelling and help determine if additional follow-ups such as training or education programs are needed.

Food safety culture is rooted in people’s personal beliefs and connections with food safety. Storytelling, as a means to inform, educate, and influence behaviors by building personal connections is a natural method of shaping and reinforcing food safety culture in an organization. By adapting stories for the target audience and identifying desired action outcomes, and by sharing honest stories from the heart, people can develop a deeper understanding of why their actions and choices around food safety truly matter.



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*Disclaimer: This document summarizes discussions by participants in a webinar that took place on December 6, 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 views or policies.*



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<https://stopfoodborneillness.org/food-safety-culture-toolkit/>

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