

FOOD SAFETY CULTURE

HOW TO TURN A PROBLEM INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

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In Brief

Food companies can transform challenges into opportunities for growth by focusing on collaboration and best practice sharing. Problems are inevitable—but they don't have to become crises. Developing a practice of identifying “yellow flags” early and often can help heighten team awareness and stop issues before they happen. Strong partnerships are also essential, since true food safety culture is shared across departments, external partners, and leadership. Closing the loop on corrective actions means digging deeper into root causes, sharing insights across sites, and embedding long-term solutions that strengthen the whole organization. Because most problems are complex, curiosity and collaboration are essential. And when data is paired with storytelling, it helps connect people emotionally to the “why” behind the work. With the right mindset, every challenge becomes a chance to adapt, learn, and grow stronger.

Key Learnings



It is important to regularly revisit existing beliefs and resist the urge to get comfortable with the status quo.



Create a process to identify and explore “weak signals”, which may be pointing to larger issues upstream.



Intentional, long-lasting relationships are essential to creating and maintaining a strong, positive food safety culture.



A problem rarely has one tidy “root cause” and is more likely the result of many intersecting factors.



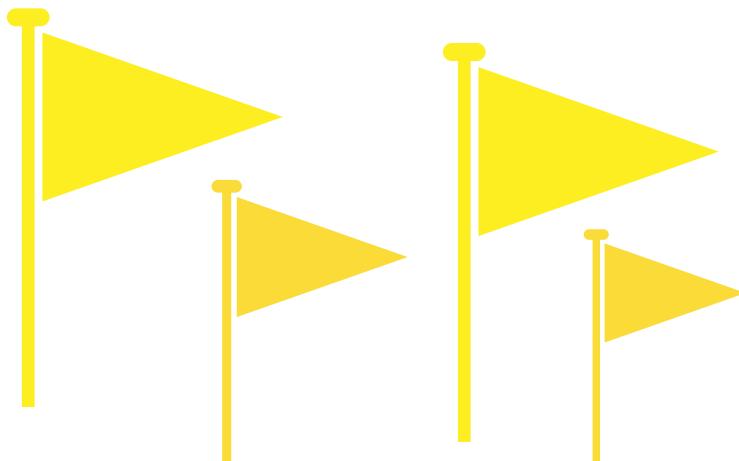
Personalizing data through storytelling can help connect an audience to the “why” of their behavior and create lasting change.

Always growing, always adapting

Nothing kills progress like complacency. As humans, we have a tendency to believe that things are static and remain the same. This may be especially true for employees who have been in their role for many years, or who might perceive change as an attack on their personal character or ability to do their job well. But no matter where you're at in your culture journey, it is imperative that you remain active and curious about opportunities for growth. This is particularly evident in the ever-changing landscape of recalls, where even historically “safe” or “low risk” products are potentially susceptible to contamination.

Stefanie Evans, Vice President of Quality Food Safety Sourcing and Design at Danone North America emphasized the importance of using “weak signals” to identify possible issues before they blossom.

A “weak signal” might not be cause for emergency in and of itself but could be a “yellow flag” that could lead to further problems down the line.



Some examples might be changes in environmental metrics, a roof leak or drain issue, or even an uptick in taste or quality complaints from consumers. Any atypical indicator that might suggest something is not as it should be. By attuning ourselves to these more subtle “yellow flags,” we can troubleshoot problems before they start and teach team members to lean in when something feels “off.” Management can reinforce this behavior by leading by example. Demonstrating that it is encouraged – and even rewarded – to speak up when something seems “not quite right” creates a culture in which employees feel safe to address issues before they spiral out of control.

Strong relationships are the key to success

Given the hyper-connected nature of the food industry, it is imperative that companies hold not only themselves, but also their partners, to high food safety and quality standards. Co-manufacturers and suppliers have a direct impact on a company's final product, which means that cultivating intentional, honest relationships with these partners is key.

WK Kellogg's Chief Supply Chain Officer, Sherry Brice, notes the ways in which an audit can reveal subtle indicators about the food safety culture of a business. This can be evident in something as simple as seeing who is physically present for the audit: who takes the time to show up, attend the tour and listen to the findings. A mature food safety culture will demonstrate a diverse coalition of champions, and an understanding that safety belongs to everyone, not just one department, as well as an understanding that we can all learn from one another.

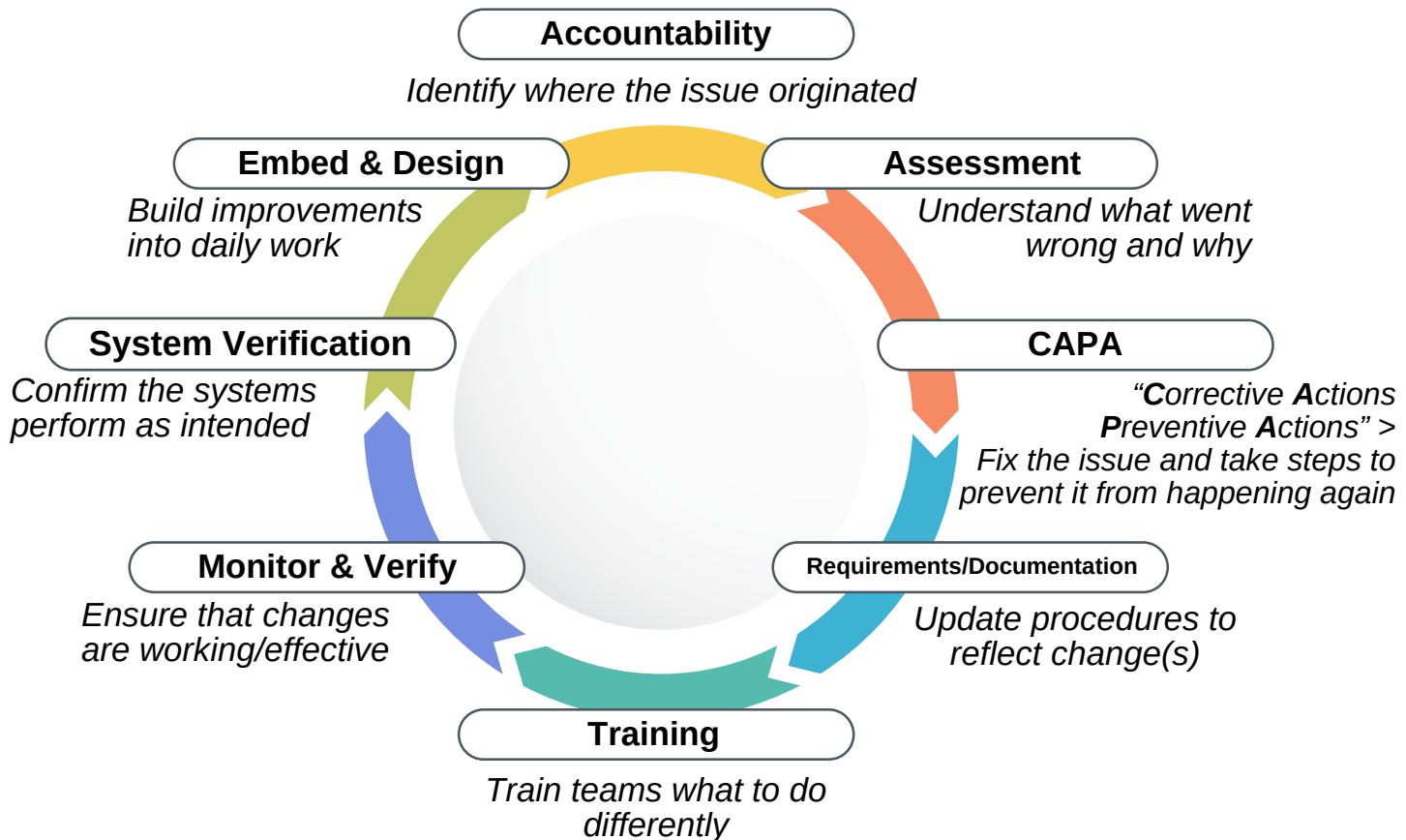
It is important to engage everyone, even senior leadership not directly involved in food safety, on issues of food safety. Helping executives find their voice on this topic is key to keeping them involved and engaged. For instance, during a tour of the plant floor, leaders might be encouraged to attend a "Gemba walk", a management practice in which leadership tours the workplace to see how work is done on a daily basis. Derived from the Japanese word "Gemba" meaning "real place", a Gemba walk allows leadership to see how work is done in real time on the shop floor.

Leaders might be encouraged to engage with a "Gemba card", which visually outlines standard practices or procedures. The card gives them something specific to ask questions about and provides an opportunity for them to learn from and connect with employees. Knowledge is power, and the more that leadership is able to be included in the conversation, the better advocates they can be for food safety across the organization.



“Closing the loop”

Sherry also highlighted WK Kellogg’s cycle of improvement, which begins with **accountability** and **assessment** (understanding what went wrong and why) and concludes with **embedding** and **designing** a lasting solution. As such, it’s important to remember to “close” the loop.



Both Sherry and Stefanie recognized that there is a tendency to stop after finding *what* the problem was, when in fact this cycle is not complete until there has been a thorough analysis of *why* the problem occurred and *how* systemic changes will be made to prevent it in the future. This is evident when it comes to dealing with **CAPAs** (Corrective Actions, Preventative Actions) following an incident: here there can be a tension between speed and effectiveness, which may result in a desire to rush past the more complex, forensic analysis of what went wrong.

By slowing down to focus on the lessons learned, taking steps for future prevention and involving the right people – which may include HR or other departments involved in training or onboarding – your team will have a better chance of preventing future incidents and walking away stronger, together. And chances are, a problem at one site is most likely also a problem at another. Sharing CAPA findings across sites and being transparent about challenges, as well as solutions, can help to “spread the wealth” and prevent others from going over the same hurdles unprepared.

Moreover, complex problems require complex solutions. Problems rarely arise from a single root cause and are more likely the result of many intersecting factors taking place simultaneously. Therefore, a healthy dose of curiosity – about what went wrong and why – can be a priceless tool for really getting to the bottom of an issue. For instance, if “training” is identified as the root cause, it’s important to understand what that means. Do we need more frequent or more targeted training? Is there a language barrier? A gap between what employees are told to do and what behavior is actually modeled? Only by speaking and engaging with genuine curiosity and honesty can systems be put in place to fill those gaps and ensure similar issues are prevented in the future.



Make it personal through storytelling

While data is essential to making informed decisions, numbers alone don’t tell a story. While traditional EMPs (Environment Monitoring Programs) can be used for making technical decisions, they lack emotional attachment. In order to convey the human impact that numbers and data may point to, Dr. Lone Jespersen of Cultivate SA suggests finding ways to humanize raw data into a relatable story or concept. One example of this might be translating a number (“globally, 420,000 people die each year of foodborne illness”) into more concrete terms (“the population of Miami dies each year due to something they ate”). Finding these subtle ways to center “people-first” storytelling in your communications is a simple, yet highly impactful way of helping an audience relate emotionally to the data, and in doing so, better understand the “why” of their work.

Every food company encounters challenges, but by finding ways to learn and grow from our mistakes, we set ourselves up for success in the future.

Conclusion

Turning problems into opportunities requires more than technical fixes—it calls for a mindset rooted in curiosity, collaboration, and continuous learning. By paying attention to weak signals, investing in strong cross-functional and external relationships, and resisting the urge to rush past deeper analysis, organizations can address issues before they escalate and build more resilient systems over time. By closing the loop on corrective actions and embedding solutions across sites helps, companies ensure that progress is lasting, not reactive. When data is paired with human-centered storytelling, it reinforces the shared purpose behind food safety work, transforming challenges into powerful catalysts for stronger culture, smarter systems, and a safer food supply for all.

Acknowledgments

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On September 3, 2025, the Alliance and FDA co-hosted a webinar as part of a series on food safety culture. The webinar greatly informed this paper and included the following presenters:

- **Sherry Brice**, Chief Supply Chain Officer, WK Kellogg
- **Stefanie Evans**, Vice President, QFS Sourcing and Design, Danone North America

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 the webinar dated above, 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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