

FOOD SAFETY CULTURE



INTERROGATE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

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In Brief

Food safety culture is shaped as much by unspoken beliefs and assumptions as by formal policies and procedures. Unspoken beliefs—such as “we’ve always done it this way” or “everyone knows the rules”—can quietly influence behavior and undermine even the strongest food safety programs. Building a resilient culture requires actively interrogating these assumptions and creating shared understanding around why food safety practices matter. This means engaging employees at every level, recognizing that training does not always equal comprehension, and ensuring individuals see how their work directly impacts consumers. Food safety thrives when it is treated as a team sport, and everyone is encouraged to ask for help and “lead in all directions.” Finally, meaningful recognition and celebration of success help reinforce positive behaviors, strengthen trust, and sustain momentum. Together, these practices create a more intentional, collaborative approach to managing risk and continuously improving food safety outcomes.

Key Learnings



Cultural assumptions are the unspoken beliefs, norms, and values shared by a group that shape behavior and decision-making.



Food safety is a team sport that thrives when everyone feels comfortable giving and receiving help.

Training does not always equal understanding; employees may be aware of the rules without fully understanding why they matter or who they affect.

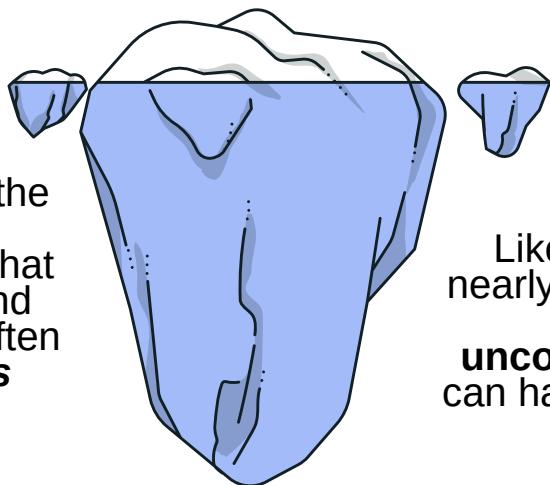


Rewards and recognition are key tools to ensure employees feel seen, valued, and respected, which in turn creates a more positive, intentional culture.

Understanding Assumptions

Cultural assumptions are the unspoken beliefs, norms, and values shared by a group that shape behavior and decision-making. Examples of cultural assumptions might include statements like: **“It smells fine, so it’s safe to eat”** – which incorrectly assumes that sensory cues are reliable indicators of microbiological safety – or **“We’ve always done it this way”** – which presumes traditional practices are inherently safe. Assumptions can undermine food safety efforts by putting employees in an “autopilot” state, in which they are left to draw their own conclusions.

Assumptions are the unspoken beliefs, norms and values that shape behaviors and decision-making, often **without conscious awareness**.



Like an iceberg, which has nearly 90% of its mass below water, these **unseen, unconscious assumptions** can have significant influence on risk perception, compliance, and organizational culture.

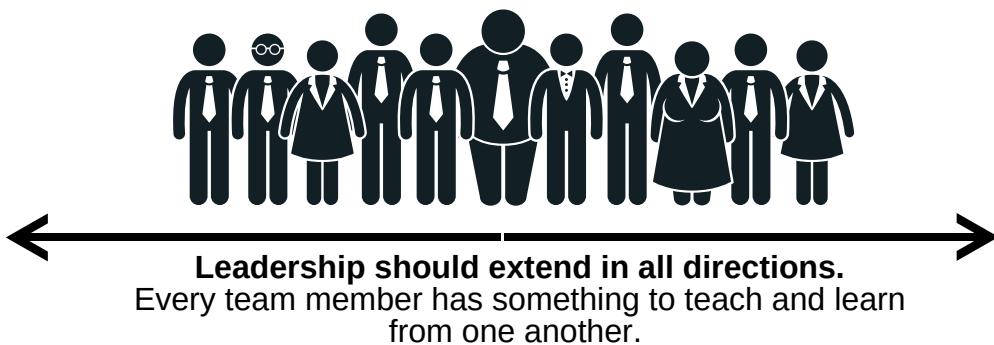
Because assumptions are unspoken and often unconscious, it is important to consistently find new ways to clearly communicate what is expected of your employees, with a particular focus on the “why.” When employees understand why certain behaviors matter or specific rules are in place, they are more likely to take those rules seriously, as well as have the context necessary to root that information as a part of a larger cohesive narrative around safety and quality.

Recognizing these assumptions requires curiosity and a willingness to ask: What beliefs are guiding people’s decisions? Which norms feel acceptable even if they conflict with best practices? And how might long-tenured workers rely on past experience in ways that inadvertently create risk? Identifying these hidden drivers is key to making meaningful cultural change.

Food Safety is a Team Sport

For Dr. Bob Reinhard, the Senior Vice President of Food Safety Quality and Regulatory Affairs at Conagra Brands, leadership begins with one simple acknowledgement: **“Everyone needs help.”**

We each come to work with a unique set of experiences and knowledge, and we all have something to learn from one another. One way to embody this approach is by **“leading in all directions”**: **Everyone in the organization benefits when hierarchy does not inhibit asking for help or offering support.** This mindset reinforces a core belief: food safety is a team sport. No single individual or department – not even Food Safety & Quality Assurance – should be singlehandedly responsible for safety. The system succeeds only when people feel comfortable giving and receiving help, no matter their role.



One way to encourage sharing and mutual leadership is by maximizing engagement with your team. Direct engagement plays a critical role in uncovering our assumptions. Being physically present allows leaders and team members alike to understand the realities of daily work. This presence should be grounded not in inspection, but in connection. Simple, frequent engagement on the shop floor builds trust and reveals how people actually complete tasks, where they feel pressure, and what shortcuts may feel justified.

Gemba walks can be a great tool to do just that. 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. This can help us spot some of those underlying assumptions that manifest in day-to-day operations, with time to intervene or course-correct before a habit causes an adverse food safety event.

Ghita Hansen, VP of Manufacturing, Americas, Enzymes shared how Novonesis has had great success with “deep cleaning days,” where all team members, including senior leadership, were invited to come and clean the shop floor. These shared experiences reinforce food safety as a collective responsibility, break down hierarchy, and create meaningful opportunities for collaboration and mutual respect across roles.

Attention to the physical environment further supports cultural alignment. Facility design should make safe behavior intuitive. Workflows, entry procedures, and sanitation steps should be easy to understand and follow without requiring complex explanations. Returning to basic design principles—clarity, simplicity, intuitive flow—can minimize errors and reinforce good habits in a way that complements training and engagement.

Training ≠ Understanding

A common cultural pitfall is the assumption that training equals understanding. Employees may “know” the rules but lack clarity on why they matter or who they protect. Without this context, the distinction between awareness and comprehension becomes blurry. This is especially important in environments with long-tenured employees whose past experience may have given them a false sense of safety, believing that previous success guarantees future safety. Providing clear explanations for procedures can help bridge this gap.

For example, Novonesis was able to successfully shift employee mindsets around safety by switching from visuals of molecules and chemical compounds to pictures of people – especially families and children – consuming the final food product that Novonesis components are used in. By helping employees see their work as directly tied to foods consumed by young and vulnerable populations, the company was able to deepen employees’ sense of responsibility and reinforce the real-world impact of their work.



Data also plays an essential role in challenging assumptions about what employees truly understand, but its value depends on how it is interpreted and communicated. Instead of relying solely on unvalidated, quick-response surveys, which can produce biased or incomplete results, organizations can draw on the wealth of information they already collect, such as engagement surveys, performance metrics, or focus groups. These existing data sets offer a “goldmine” of insight into cultural strengths and weaknesses. Equally important is storytelling with data—translating analytical findings into narratives that help employees understand what the data says, why it matters, and how they influence what happens next. This approach helps connect individual actions to organizational outcomes, reinforcing the idea that safety is everyone’s responsibility.

Celebrate Success

One of the most powerful levers in shaping food safety culture is recognition and appreciation. When people feel seen, valued, and respected, they are more likely to take ownership of responsible behaviors. Recognition can occur in many forms, from company-wide programs to team-based awards, or even thoughtful gestures tailored specifically to individuals’ needs. For instance, some employees might appreciate a gift card, while others might feel more appreciated through an extra day of paid time off (PTO) to spend with their family.

When possible, crediting a team for success, rather than a single person, can create a more collaborative atmosphere. “Success” might look like a team finding the root cause of a quality defect, like high mold counts coming from a bad air filter, or celebrating a milestone, such as passing a mock recall with flying colors. A team lunch or even the occasional extracurricular activity can be a fun and effective means of bringing people together and recognizing excellence.

Underlying all of these cultural strategies should be the understanding that food safety is the management of risk, not a static end state. Cultures grow stronger when change is framed positively: not as an indictment of past practices, but as an opportunity to learn together and continuously improve. Teams that have experienced quality failures or recalls often become powerful advocates for safer practices by sharing what they’ve learned. Teams will experience both highs and lows, but it is essential to celebrate small wins to keep employees motivated and on track.



Conclusion

Building a strong food safety culture requires moving beyond assumptions and actively engaging with the beliefs, behaviors, and systems that shape daily decision-making. By interrogating unspoken norms, organizations can better understand where gaps exist between training and true comprehension, and where well-intentioned habits may introduce risk. Food safety thrives when it is treated as a shared responsibility—one supported by visible leadership, meaningful engagement, intuitive environments, and open collaboration at every level. When employees understand not just what is expected of them, but why it matters, they are more likely to take ownership of their role in protecting consumers. Coupled with thoughtful use of data and consistent recognition of positive behaviors, these efforts help create a culture where food safety is not just a requirement, but a collective commitment to continuous learning, improvement, and care.



Acknowledgments

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On October 29, 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:

- **Ghita Hansen**, Vice President Manufacturing, Americas, Enzymes, Novoness
- **Bob Reinhard**, Senior Vice President, Food Safety Quality and Regulatory Affairs, Conagra Brands

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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