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Setting the Tone to Support a Strong Food Safety Culture



Members of any organization look to their leaders for direction about organizational culture. A leader who sets a positive tone through word and deed and by consistently modeling and exercising good leadership principles will bring alignment and enhance the effectiveness of the organization's culture.

Executive leaders in food firms have an opportunity to establish a dialogue within the organization to describe a desired cultural framework for food safety excellence.

This article focuses on how senior leaders, namely CEOs, the executive team, functional leaders, plant managers, and their staff, can take steps to strike the right tone to achieve their organizational culture objectives.



Figure 1.1. Winning Practices to Set a Positive Tone*

THREE TAKE AWAYS

- Provide candid and regular reviews, education, and measurements.
- Identify and drive your specific 'must win' food safety priorities.
- Foster ownership among the wide community of leaders.

While we focus on the tone set internally in this article, the tone set externally is also of great importance. External stakeholders are interested in not only what product a firm makes but also how it makes it. How the firm safely produces food is increasingly of great import to consumers. Many organizations have adopted a corporate responsibility (CR) model. Consumers, investors, and employees rightfully demand transparency, trust, and credibility in how organizations fulfill their role as responsible corporate citizens. This ensures sound and ethical stewardship of the environment, sustainability, and worker health and safety. Food safety fits into this same basket, and the CR model provides a way to create an executive forum for routine review of performance in these key topics.

In this article, we share our observations of how leaders successfully set a positive tone through their actions and communications. You will learn how leaders can positively impact food safety culture based on real-world examples.

Based on our collective experience, we have identified 'Seven Winning Practices' that we would expect to see from any senior leader in a food company (Figure 1.1). We also provide you, a food safety leader, with some practical tips to help your senior leaders set the right tone for food safety cultural excellence.

Practice 1: Ensuring Consistency

People in an organization pay attention to observed behaviors, both good and bad. When the organization sees consistency from senior leaders,

it reinforces its own behaviors. Executive leaders will be noticed when attending team meetings, visiting sites, engaging business partners, and in many other situations. Their consistent adherence to proper food safety behaviors will reinforce consistent standards throughout the organization. This consistency will support the enhancement of the organization's food safety culture. Conversely, inconsistent behavior can lead to chaos with deviations from food safety expectations and standards. This results in a less coherent culture and will be easily recognized by customers and business partners to the detriment of the organization.

Executive reinforcement of the foundational need for being the best you can be in food safety has made an impact at Land O'Lakes. An opportunity was identified several years ago, when the company's senior food safety leaders recognized that training and education had largely focused on the plants, which at the time was the same in many food companies. Land O'Lakes determined that the leadership teams and cross-functional corporate personnel would benefit by having a greater understanding of what it meant to work in a food company with the added responsibility for making and distributing food that is safe, for both people and animals. Commitment was given for a full-day food safety workshop; initially, all senior executives attended, including the CEO, who opened and closed the event. This was followed by open attendance for all corporate staff, 800 of whom have now been through this experience. At the end of the session, each left their own written commitment with food safety leadership. This effort alone has driven food safety awareness to a whole new level across all corporate functions.

Practical suggestions for senior

leaders to set the right tone in maintaining consistency:

- Always ask food safety-related questions and provide direct, immediate, and specific verbal feedback when on visits to manufacturing facilities. Use a visit as an opportunity to reinforce how expected behaviors relate to the organization's values and food safety system requirements.
- Reinforce support for actions that assist and further the mission of cultural excellence.
- Share with teams, if appropriate, summaries of all significant meetings, executive reviews, and of any engagement with business partners where food safety is on the agenda.

Sharing your own food safety objectives and deliverables with your team is an excellent way to model accountability and transparency, and shows how individual objectives are intertwined with furthering the organization's culture.

Practice 2: Allocation of Resources to Food Safety

Allocation of financial resources by executive leaders sends a strong message to the organization that food safety is important. These resources could be capital for plant improvements or IT system investments, expenses for training and education, travel for supplier audits, participation in external meetings, or receiving a requested expansion of personnel to drive and support the food safety agenda. The impact of these allocations goes beyond the immediate project. This speaks loudly to employees about the importance of food safety in the organization, thereby boosting the effectiveness of the food safety culture.

An example that we have seen involves a major frozen food firm that decided to ring-fence capital funds

strictly for food safety initiatives. Previous management, a private equity firm, had not allocated resources to food safety, and therefore the organization did not believe that the new management team would invest in food safety. The ring fencing of funds sent a strong message to the organization that food safety would be an investment priority.

Another example of food safety investment sending a message is a mid-size confectionary company. The sole plant of this firm needed a new roof to stop roof leaks. A project to fix the roof languished until the CEO came to the realization that this wasn't just a nuisance: The leak endangered consumers. The CEO quickly approved the project. This action helped set the tone that food safety was an important investment.

Practical suggestions for food safety leaders to help senior leaders set the right tone in managing resources:

- Work with the leaders of other functions to forge and maintain continuous dialogue to gain influence and support. The value of food safety in terms of minimizing risk, protecting consumers, and adding value to the bottom line should always be at the forefront of any discussion. Requests for resources should always fit within the corporate and food safety culture model and lead to positive future benefits.
- Proper framing of resource requests can enhance the likelihood of project approval. Researchers in behavioral economics have shown that framing resource requests in a manner consistent with the approver's style increases the likelihood of project approval. Food safety leaders should understand the company's requirements and frame resource requests appropriately.

Practice 3: Transparency

An unhindered view of the ‘current state’—the strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities—is an important transformational step in any cultural journey. This clear view requires building and sustaining trust, and reinforcing a mindset that knowledge and information sharing is paramount to achieving excellence. Performance shortfalls and challenges along the journey are important data points to share and reflect upon constructively. This reflection will help build organizational resilience and envision prevention processes from the ‘ground up.’ This also reduces the likelihood of the same problem being repeated across the organization by another site.

Learning from ‘mistakes,’ ‘failures,’ or ‘near misses’ is an invaluable experience to propel positive culture change. A culture of safety excellence is well documented in the air transport industry and is driven by an uncompromising commitment not only to studying failure and near-miss events in-depth, but also in systematically sharing these across the entire industry.¹

At Glanbia, the ‘GPS’ program (Glanbia Performance System) recognizes the principle of ‘celebrating and identifying losses.’ A leader must be willing to openly recognize and provide an appreciation for the transparency of sharing of the potential losses, incidences, and identified risks. This recognition demonstrates appreciation (not consequences) for the identification of near misses and high-risk conditions that are then systematically shared as part of learning and improvement. Glanbia has developed a global ‘near miss’ database that aggregates both internally and externally occurring cases, which Glanbia uses as part of analysis, leadership team review, and reflection. Leaders from the individual site reporting the incident

will develop the case study, root cause analysis, and key learnings, which are shared in the wider leadership forum. All sites are requested to confirm their scope and potential needed improvement actions from the case.

A question asked in Glanbia is prompted by a concern for a dashboard that is all green—Have we set the bar high enough? Did we aggressively identify emerging risks? Sometimes forcing a bell curve in standard reporting [e.g., reports must have a minimum of 10% of their key performance indicators (KPIs) in ‘red’ to highlight where work is needed] can create a more open sense to reflect upon vulnerabilities.

Practical suggestions for senior leaders to set the right tone and ensure transparency:

- Embrace the reporting of leading and lagging indicators that both reflects a commitment to ‘organizational learning’ and removes any filters for good news only.
- Reward and recognize people for sharing their learnings formally and highlight (whenever possible) the savings/avoided losses by the solution they provide the organization.
- Reward and recognize people who aren’t afraid to speak up when they see something that doesn’t look right.
- Provide insights to your leaders on how other industries excelled by embracing transparency and used challenges as a forum for learning. Two excellent reads are ‘Black Box Thinking,’¹ and ‘A complaint is a gift.’²
- Build trust and transparency by encouraging manufacturing site leaders to share and debrief internally on a routine basis with their entire team—condensing ‘what went well’ and ‘where can we do better.’ Creating the dialogue in a smaller,

more familiar forum can encourage teams to share more widely.

Practice 4: Appreciation

Positive reinforcement and acknowledging the effort made, even without the desired results, is a winning approach that encourages constructive behaviors. To be effective, feedback must be timely, regular, balanced, and consistent. While appreciation cannot be dished out randomly, a senior leader should not miss the opportunity to praise great results, significant ongoing efforts, and landmark achievements consistent with the corporate values and vision. The positive upward cycle of senior leader support and praise cannot be underestimated. At Glanbia, the values of ‘winning together’ and ‘showing respect’ hardwire the principles of praise and appreciation, where appropriate and at all levels.

It is widely known that employee engagement and motivation are amplified by believing their contributions ‘make a difference’ and when they have a belief in the organization’s mission and vision. When setting a path to excellence, recognizing important contributions to further that mission is essential and adds a motivational multiplier across the organization. Land O’Lakes has had an all-encompassing quality recognition program for a number of years and celebrates winning and diverse contributions from across the entire enterprise. Additionally, Glanbia has implemented value-based recognition programs across the business that call out each of their core values in all activities and functions.

It is important to reflect on both the small and large contributions, and ensure that all functions feel able to participate. The recognition forum can be used to reinforce the organizational mantra of food safety cultural

excellence. The individual efforts are not 'random events' but small steps along the journey.

Practical ideas for senior leaders to set the tone for appreciation:

- Establish an awards and recognition program specifically for food safety and quality programs. This can be individuals, teams, or entire departments or locations.
- Provide special training, missions, or assignments for those who have the ambition to grow their careers and for professional development in food safety and quality management.
- Award small, on-the-spot recognition at routine meetings and scheduled events that recognizes individual contributions and behaviors. These can be small gift cards, mementos, clothing with the company logo, or a personalized certificate.
- Create formally structured programs that encourage the identification of solutions (and celebrate them), as well as losses, without fear of negative consequences.
- Work on a "just culture" approach to running the business.³ The just culture approach focuses on finding why problems happen, not who is to blame. The tone this sets could lead to a positive attitude to uncovering problems and solving them.

Practice 5: Adaptability

Understanding and effecting cultural change within food safety will require adaptation to existing cultures across diverse organizations, which may be geographically separated, have different customer profiles, use different processes, and have different organizational maturity levels. This can also include incorporating new cultures integrated through joint ventures, mergers, and acquisitions.

While some fundamental principles may remain sacred, practicality dictates that there may not always be a 'one size fits all' solution for every type of food safety standard or policy. Adjustments that are necessary for underlying requirements are to be expected and, subject to review, can be acceptable.

When reviewing a specific policy or program deployment, a senior leader must understand the maturity of the operating culture as well as the current food safety programs. Ensuring a top to bottom understanding of hazards and risks is documented in several models of food safety culture, as outlined in Jespersen et al.⁴ Having an understanding ensures that credible plans are in place to manage risks effectively. Sometimes, a food safety team might be faced with a situation where there is not yet a definitive plan for full resolution. Adaptability should promote an open and rigorous review of risk mitigation approaches.

Practical ideas for senior leaders to set the tone for adaptability:

- Have an open and challenging discussion of food safety policies and programs with key stakeholders when they are being drafted and through roll out to ensure true alignment. A well-represented review team can often flag significant challenges and possible solutions at an early stage. A senior leader can set the right tone by seeking to ensure visibility and buy in at the earliest stage possible.
- A senior leader should advocate and support standardized risk assessment tools and models that drive local level ownership in identifying risks and solutions to manage them. These will create a robust and factual discussion around deviating conditions and how these are being managed.

- Regular, focused, deep review of specific food safety programs, with the collective subject matter experts, will foster an active and open dialog concerning 'solutions' and the manner in which local adaptations have been applied for achieving the same principle requirements.

Practice 6: Accessibility

Executive and senior leaders must be fully accessible, highly visible ambassadors and advocates for food safety excellence, both internally and externally. A proactive and deliberate approach to ensuring access and good collaboration is a must, especially in larger organizations.

In some sense, a senior food safety leader is a 'hub' position that needs to extend in all directions, hierarchically and functionally, to ensure the message, the program, the progress, the successes, and the opportunities are heard and shared. This is about building a trusting relationship, and it's not always easy. While formal processes like newsletters and electronic updates are useful, a personal touch (through face to face contact) will be needed for building a respectful working relationship between stakeholders.

For senior executives and business leaders, a chronic failure to be accessible by phone, email, or face to face could inadvertently send a message that food safety may not be as important as other topics on the very busy corporate agenda. Accessibility provides a forum for accountability check-ins and a continuity of commitment that will be noticed by the working teams. This element is consistent with communication and also manifests as leadership commitment, which are two important elements in a systems review.⁴

Practical ideas for senior leaders to set the tone for accessibility:

- Senior leaders should aspire to be highly visible ambassadors and advocates for food safety excellence wherever possible.
- Senior leaders should ensure that well organized, agenda-driven food safety review meetings are held routinely—even when there is no significant change or update—to keep everyone on message and focused on the mission.
- Senior leaders should always be available for food safety updates and issues resolution as needed. There are always proactive opportunities to provide succinct and meaningful review, commentary, and potential lessons learned on cases outside of the organization's own walls, but present in the media.
- Senior food safety leaders should schedule routine one-on-one meetings with team members, functional leaders, and executive leads.
- Senior food safety leaders should establish routine reviews among key quality leaders and customer contacts.

Practice 7: Assessment

Regular review of food safety performance can ensure reassurance at the executive level that programs reflect corporate values and demonstrate continuous improvement, as well as provide governance for activities across the enterprise. The assessment and reporting element is a senior food safety leader's opportunity to provide the dashboard, key measures, strategy, and direction to the decision makers and, conversely, provide feedback and direction to the team. The critical importance of setting food safety goals and providing indicators of progress (leading and lagging) has been called out by Yiannas.⁵

Progress, risks, or investment needs

that don't always make a byline in an executive boardroom will risk losing visibility in any enterprise. Metrics should be reported upwards in a succinct manner that highlights results, trends, needed actions, and, ideally, the level of risk prioritization. Land O'Lakes, Glanbia, Mars, and others have processes to share this critical information with senior-most executive leaders and with their boards for awareness and action. Any program without governance and routine progress review will quickly lose momentum and risk becoming defunct. Executive leaders must be aware of the risks to the organization's performance and reputation, and it is in the role of a senior food safety leader to ensure the appropriate metrics are in place and routinely discussed.

Practical ideas for senior leaders to set the tone for assessment:

- Senior leaders in food safety must ensure a regular and disciplined review among the organization's most-senior executives. They must also align on the appropriate KPIs and measures, and provide a candid view on progress and challenges, using leading and lagging indicators.
- Senior executives should make time to attend the food safety review meetings and actively engage with other executive leaders. When unable to attend the main meeting, request a one-on-one discussion.
- Having a corporate executive, other than the food safety leader, communicate food safety news, summaries, and activities at every board meeting is a great way to set the tone that every senior leader can and must talk food safety.
- A policy statement, signed off by relevant senior leaders, should be in place that clarifies reporting standards and expectations for the food safety mission.

Helping Senior Leaders Set the Tone for Food Safety Excellence: Conclusion and Final Thoughts

Consumer goods and other organizations are increasingly measured by their commitment to corporate responsibility and accordingly will be held to ever-increasing standards of transparency, ethical behavior, and trustworthiness. Financial results alone—even in the absence of 'issues'—are not enough. That organizations are fostering a proactive and comprehensive view with culture driving prevention and resilience will be increasingly open to scrutiny by external stakeholders. This very public lens will significantly influence the reputation and trust of food and ingredient producers, and calls for evidence and measures of their commitment, in this case, to food safety excellence, are increasingly being heard.

In this frame, food safety is not a result of materials, people, and processes alone, but must be in the organizational DNA and psyche, and safeguarded by embedded cultural 'guard rails.' Well-founded and communicated corporate values are the first, basic building blocks from which food safety culture (and all corporate responsibility themes) can be meaningfully derived. These values must be manifest in the organization and provide a true compass on the direction and decisions that occur every day across the enterprise. How to define, measure, and report this culture of excellence remains a subject of vigorous discussion among the leaders in this field, with several iterations and models available.

A great way of thinking about the food safety culture journey is to relate it to the 20-mile march described by Jim Collins in his book "Great by Choice:"⁶

"Whatever comes at us, we keep moving forward, a bit at a time, every day,

fully supported by the organization and from the top."

As a leader in food safety, how do you support and encourage the organization's senior leaders in setting a positive tone for food safety in today's environment? Let's review the three take aways:

- ☑ *Provide candid and regular reviews, education, and measurements:*
 - Be completely honest in the assessment and communication of the food safety maturity of the organization. Educate such that the information being shared makes sense and be pragmatic regarding issues and solutions.
 - Set up frequent food safety status reviews with senior leaders, either in a group setting or in a one-on-one meeting—both can be very effective. For a group meeting, you'll need to ensure active participation and discussion. In a one-on-one meeting, you'll have the undivided attention of the leader.
 - Provide updates on what is happening external to the organization—examples of new technologies and food safety management approaches, as well as examples of other company failures and key learnings, which can be very helpful in keeping interest alive.
- ☑ *Identify and drive your specific 'must win' food safety priorities:*
 - Communicate and agree on well-aligned priorities for strengthening the food safety program. The kind of areas that could be in scope

for prioritization could include: hygienic upgrade of buildings and equipment, technology/systems investments, Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points program deep dives and revisions, sanitation validation excellence, high-risk raw materials supplier qualifications, environmental risk assessments, or formulation risk review processes. A key is that these are rarely new areas but areas already known and identified as priorities that could be elevated in importance for a 6- to 36-month focused effort to reach a milestone.

- Senior leaders must also align on appropriate KPIs and provide, with one voice, a candid view on progress and challenges against the agreed priorities, supported by leading and lagging indicators, and surfacing hurdles and solutions. The KPIs should be consistent with and aligned to the agreed priority areas of the program.

- ☑ *Foster ownership among the wide community of leaders:*
 - Recruit a senior leader other than the food safety leadership; communicating food safety news, summaries, and activities at senior management meetings is a great way to demonstrate the expectation that everyone, including senior leaders, must own food safety.
 - Ensure a clear and intuitive link of organizational values and vision to the food safety agenda. Reputation, consumer trust, and brand integrity are integral to organizational suc-

cess. Ensuring senior leaders in all functions understand this and embrace their role in protecting and building trust through food safety excellence will be a catalyst to cultural transformation.

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