

# Exploring management attitudes towards leadership roles in food manufacturing

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## Introduction

'Leaders' play a pivotal role in setting and driving positive examples for food safety. 'Walking the talk' can ensure that managers at all levels prioritise and encourage consistent food safety expectations company-wide<sup>1</sup>. Being a visible and accessible leader supports an open, trustworthy and thriving food safety culture<sup>2</sup>. Many managerial traits contribute to effective leadership including attitudes, experience, strategy, skillset, beliefs and mind-set to name a few<sup>2,3</sup>. Thus, exploring hierarchical management leadership perceptions in an operational food business may highlight leadership characteristics that could be improved to enhance food safety culture progression.

## Purpose

To explore how managers perceive their roles as leaders across hierarchical levels to identify opportunities to enhance communication and working relationships to support food safety culture progress and the assumed benefit for food safety performance.

## Methods

A qualitative coding method following the GFSI<sup>2</sup> food safety culture dimensional framework was applied to 16 interviews with hierarchical managers (senior  $n=5$ , middle  $n=5$ , junior  $n=6$ ) at 3 food manufacturing and processing sites and corporate head office.

## Results

- Across sites, senior and middle manager leadership attitudes had both beneficial and detrimental impacts.
- Senior managers had a clear appreciation of the ramifications of poor food safety but seldom visited sites.
- Middle manager attitudes appeared to influence junior manager perceptions of their leaders.

### Senior Managers:

*"It's not a mission statement or set of goals which are written down. And actually, they're not very well written down..."* (SM5)

*"...I do get involved in audits. But I don't actually go to the units on a day to day basis because it just doesn't happen really."* (SM3)

*"I do think that as a company we are sort of mainly driven with quality ... we've only got to fail once and your reputation has gone out of the window."* (SM1)

### Middle Managers:

**SITE 1:**  
*"They [SM] saw some [food safety culture] aspects as hindrance right, I'd only see the value of it."* (MM1)  
*"I've got to put trust in the guys downstairs to do the best for, for us as a business."* (MM2)

**SITE 2:**  
*"So I think leading by example is important [...] and it does worry me. I'm a Director. I'm legally responsible umm and yeah. You can't, I can't possibly watch everybody..."* (MM3)

**SITE 3:**  
*"...if there was um you know a food poisoning outbreak sourced here, it would be curtains [...] you know, headline news and um its quite a big uh big responsibility as far as running a business is concerned."* (MM4)

### Junior Managers:

**SITE 1:**  
*"Yeah, they [MM] come down most days. Yeah. But they're [...] very busy as well so they've got us to run the place for them. But it's always nice for them to come down [...] Keep you on your toes!"* (JM3)

**SITE 2:**  
*"So it feels like when you come upstairs to try and explain things you feel like you're... more whiney than, but you're not whiney. You're just trying to explain the problems that arise."* (JM8)

**SITE 3:**  
*"Open door policy I would call it. My door is always open. Literally. Literally! Plus I'm sitting next to canteen! I talk to them all the time."* (JM2)  
*"You know that's all you need isn't it. Thanks and appreciation. That's it."* (JM4)

## Conclusions

Senior managers recognised that food safety was fundamental to protect business reputation, however the food safety strategy was undocumented and thus, site (middle) manager attitudes varied.

At **Site 1**, attitudes overall (middle and junior managers) were positive with regular production interaction, strong reciprocal trust systems and a site manager who appreciated the 'bigger picture' and value of food safety culture.

At **Site 2** (with the highest food safety risk), attitudes were less encouraging with the site manager indicating the burden of food safety responsibility as a leader, and junior managers who were subsequently reluctant to ask for support.

**Site 3** indicated a similar perception to senior managers; that a food safety error could be catastrophic and as junior managers felt appreciated, open communication was encouraged with all staff.

## Significance

**GFSI Vision and Mission:** A documented food safety strategy developed by senior managers sets expectations which can support middle managers in their decision-making and operational prioritisations.

**GFSI Consistency:** In turn, junior managers benefit from a consistent attitude towards food safety (as all managers 'walk the same talk'); which message is cascaded down to production departments.

**GFSI People:** Improving communication and support relationships between and across management levels company-wide would create a positive learning environment where experience and skill-sharing is encouraged.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Griffith et al. (2010) *Do business get the food poisoning they deserve? The importance of food safety culture.* At: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/00070701011034420/full/html>; <sup>2</sup>Global Food Safety Initiative (2018) *A culture of food safety.* At: <https://mygfsi.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/GFSI-Food-Safety-Culture-Full.pdf>; <sup>3</sup>Griffith (2013) *Advances in understanding the impact of personal hygiene and human behaviour on food safety.* At: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780857094384500200>.