



Discussion paper

Reducing food safety errors in the United States: Leader behavioral integrity for food safety, error reporting, and error management



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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the challenge of reducing food safety errors in the foodservice industry. Results of a survey of 255 fulltime food service professionals supported our proposed causal chain of impact that runs from “leader behavioral integrity for food safety” (the extent to which leaders/supervisors consistently enact and enforce food safety rules) through the proportion of food safety errors reported, through “error management” (an integrated set of practices involving error detection, correction, analysis, prevention and learning), finally to reduced food safety violations. Specifically, this study found the mediating effect of error reporting between leader behavioral integrity for food safety and error management; and the mediating effect of error management between error reporting and food safety violations. Results suggest that ongoing support and incentivizing of supervisors’ behavior may be a critical supplement to skill-based training of employees in reducing food safety errors and thus violations. The study found that high leader behavioral integrity for food safety can improve error reporting and error management leading to a reduction in the risk of foodborne illness, which is the ultimate goal of a food safety training program. It is recommended that managers serve as role models by following proper food safety practices and reporting errors themselves. A manager who consistently enacts food safety priorities and protocols conveys more clear information about positive organizational priorities for safety, provides clearer incentives for safety behaviors, models desired attitudes, and enhances employee trust and thus willingness to learn; which is critical for the success of food safety programs.

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1. Introduction

Approximately 48 million people get sick annually because of foodborne illness, which equates to roughly one sixth the population of the United States (U.S.), with 128,000 hospitalizations and 3000 deaths per year (Scallan et al., 2011). The estimated annual economic costs related to foodborne illness are approximately \$77 billion (Scharff, 2012). Similarly, the European Union reported 5363 foodborne illnesses in 2012 caused by *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, bacterial toxins, and viruses (EFSA, 2014). Foodborne illness is an urgent problem that threatens the health of people and generates significant economic losses (Greig et al., 2007).

The foodservice industry plays a significant responsibility in preventing foodborne illnesses. In 2013, 51% of all foodborne illnesses in the U. S. were attributed to restaurants including sit-down dining and fast food (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2015). While some argue that this is an artifact of greater reporting, recent national outbreaks such as the multiple outbreaks of norovirus at Chipotle Restaurants, demonstrate how employees decisions regardless of knowledge can affect public health. Even though absolute food safety is most likely unattainable, the foodservice industry should continually strive for this goal while maintaining quality. In general, food handler training is seen as one strategy whereby food safety can be increased, offering long-term benefits to the food industry (Smith, 1994). However, current knowledge-based training may not be enough to ensure or change certain safety behaviors. Theoretically, knowledge alone is insufficient to trigger preventive practices (Tones and Tilford, 1994). Powell et al. (1997) surveyed 50 staff members at 12 food establishments, and found no relationship between the knowledge level of

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staff and their premises' inspection rating. This admittedly small-scale study suggests that training alone – which imparts knowledge – may be insufficient to elicit the desired adherence to safety protocols. Motivation must be added in order to shape behavior. We consider the role of leadership in fostering such motivation. In doing so, this study specifically focuses on leader behavioral integrity for food safety – the extent to which leaders/supervisors consistently enact and enforce food safety rules. While leader behavioral integrity in general has been extensively researched and has been linked with critical outcomes (such as performance, attitudes, and behaviors) (Simons et al., 2014), no previous study has specifically focused on leader behavioral integrity for food safety. In addition, many studies have focused on identifying most common risk factors and reducing them (Scallan et al., 2011; Todd et al., 2007; Jones and Angulo, 2006) as well as factors contributing to developing a successful food safety culture (Powell et al., 2011; Neal et al., 2012), no previous research has considered leader behavioral integrity as a factor that can reduce food safety violations.

Error management, an integrated set of practices aimed at error detection, correction, and analysis, learning from, and preventing errors (Hofmann and Frese, 2011), has been linked with safety outcomes and organizational performance in several settings (Van Dyck et al., 2013; Van Dyck et al., 2005). This leads to the question of whether error management can reduce food safety errors or violations thus reducing the risk of foodborne illness outbreaks. Few studies have examined predictors of error management. Given the desirability of error management and its performance and safety consequences, the present study addresses this lack. Specifically, this study focuses on error reporting and leader behavioral integrity for food safety as predictors of error management. These relationships have not been tested before.

1.1. Purpose of the study

The main objective of this study is to examine whether and how managers and shift leaders can stimulate error reporting and error management among their employees. The purpose of this research is threefold. First, the study examines whether leader behavioral integrity for food safety increases employees' proportionate reporting of food safety errors. Second, this research investigates if increased error reporting results in improved error management in food-service organizations. Moreover, this study examines the mediating effect of error reporting between leader behavioral integrity for food safety and error management. Finally, the study examines the relationship between error management and food safety violations in food-service organizations. The study proposes that greater error management will result in lower food safety violations. Given that food safety is a critical issue in the services/hospitality industry, this study makes a significant contribution to the services/hospitality management literature. Additionally, the findings have important implications for managers in the food-service industry (hotels, restaurants, café, catering, dining services, hospitals, schools, universities, and cafeterias). The proposed relationships have not been tested before.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Leader behavioral integrity for food safety and error reporting

Behavioral integrity (BI) has been defined as the perceived pattern of alignment between an entity's words and actions (Simons, 2002). It comprises both perceptions of promise-keeping and of enacting espoused values. Leader behavioral integrity refers to the extent to which the employees believe their manager lives by his

or her word. This perceived consistency is understood as both a driver of employee trust in leadership and as a source of clear communications about leaders' priorities and expectations (Simons, 2008). A study of 76 same-branded U.S. hotels found that employees' perceptions of their managers' BI had strong influence over discretionary service behavior, employee turnover, guest satisfaction and hotel profitability (Simons, 2008). In a study involving 25 organizations in the service industry in Belgium Leroy et al. (2012) found the influence of leader behavioral integrity on follower commitment and work role performance. In a study involving 658 nurses in the health care industry, Halbesleben et al. (2013) demonstrated that leader behavioral integrity for high safety values is positively associated with greater reporting of occupational injuries. Prottas (2013) found that behavioral integrity was positively related to job satisfaction, job engagement, health, and life satisfaction, and negatively related to stress, turnover likelihood, and work-to-family conflict. Palanski, Kahai, and Yammarino (2011) collected data from clinical nurses and their managers, and found that behavioral integrity increases trust which consequently increases performance. A recent meta-analysis found that assessments of managerial behavioral integrity are reliably associated with employee satisfaction, commitment, trust, and performance (Simons et al., 2014).

We focus here on an aspect of behavioral integrity that is issue-specific, as specific forms of integrity are often more closely related to outcomes than are more "generic" versions (Halbesleben et al., 2013). Leader behavioral integrity for food safety reflects the extent to which managers or persons in charge (PIC) "walk the talk" or "practice what they preach" concerning food safety (Simons, 2002; Leroy et al., 2012). Neal et al. (2012) reported that food service employees identified management as a critical factor for developing a strong food safety culture. More specifically, food service employees want not only consistency with the organization, but accountability from management as well. Management needs to exemplify good behavior but more importantly, champion the food safety cause. Scholars have argued that mere communication of expectations by managers may not be enough to influence positive employee behaviors because communicated expectations may not come across, may not be fully trusted, and/or may be contradicted by the managers' actual behavior (Van Dyck et al., 2013). Word-deed misalignments often occur when managers face competing goals and have to make trade-offs between them (Simons, 2002). In the current food-service context, it is well known that food safety goals often are in conflict with other goals such as productivity, speed, or convenience which are also important goals for organizations (Zohar, 2000). Situations in which managers face competing goals are common and based on these choices that leaders make in such situations, food service employees infer how important food safety really is to their leaders (Zohar and Luria, 2004). Alignment between managements' words and deeds concerning food safety values is important for fostering priorities in food service organizations as clear signals are sent to subordinates about the value of food safety in comparison to other pressing role demands (Zohar, 2010). When subordinates notice that their managers not only talk but also walk the food safety talk (e.g., when a manager encourages subordinate to report food safety errors, and also reports food safety errors himself/herself), followers are more likely to trust the managers' dedication to food safety (Simons, 2002), which in turn can positively affect subordinates' food safety behaviors and error reporting regarding food safety. For example, a manager who continues to take food temperature despite being busy or during a high-volume serving period conveys to followers an unmistakable message about the importance of food safety. On the other hand, when the explicit rules regarding error reporting are different from the implicit rules that are actually displayed by a manager, subordinates tend to stop listening to the words and focus on the

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