Courage over comfort

The following facts are well known:
- we continually see trusting consumers get sick or lose their lives from eating food;
- many of these tragic cases could be avoided and are often related to human assumptions and errors;
- up to 54% less errors happen in strong cultures;
- cultural maturity impacts the cost of delivering food quality, which can be as much as 22.5% of sales.

So, with this knowledge, we are not short of rational arguments for why change in food safety culture is required, but still the food industry is faced with some fundamental challenges like creating sufficient time for adequate and effective training\(^1\). In order to implement a strong food safety culture, behavioural changes may be required.

**Increased courage**

After a training match, 20 times grand slam winner, $119m prize winner, Roger Federer, is stopped by Bill. Bill is a club volunteer, father of three, and working for the day to check that only those with the right badges are allowed into the players’ lounge. Roger does not have his badge on. Bill refuses him access to the lounge. Finally, Roger’s badge appears with a helper and he is let into the lounge by Bill, the club volunteer and badge checker for the day.

There could have been a number of different outcomes to this tennis story. Bill could have let the famous player in on face value. Roger could have raised his voice and insisted that he be let in. But neither reacted this way. Bill put courage over comfort and managed the risk of anyone gaining unrightful access to the lounge. Roger put courage over comfort as he respected Bill’s role and the rules; he waited patiently for his badge to arrive. They both acted with integrity. Integrity is that magic glue that allows tough decisions to be respected despite position power or lack thereof.

**Measuring and impacting integrity**

Integrity in the food industry can be measured by use of social desirability rating or simply put ‘the prevailing willingness of team members in all roles to Walk the Talk’.

Walking the Talk scale was...
developed as an integral part of assessing an organisation’s culture of food safety\(^2\). Walking the Talk data gathered across 60+ companies in North America, Australia and Europe reveals three clusters with distinctive characteristics (Figure 1).

Cluster #1: is characterised by teams that are less worried about their own image than food safety performance and always ready to speak up on risks.

Cluster #2: Tendency to overemphasise negative or positive and to answer in order to preserve image. There are mixed feelings about speaking up on risks.

Cluster #3: Worried about self-image and reluctant to give true answer regarding risks.

Figure 1 Walking the Talk clusters based on the Social Desirability scale. Jespersen et al, 2018
Using the example of Bill and Roger, Bill would be clear on expectations and empowered to act in accordance with those in cluster #1, less so in #2, and likely not at all in #3. Translating this to food safety in a manufacturing environment, it is the difference between a supervisor or frontline worker stopping the line in cluster #1 and not stopping the line in cluster #3. Alternatively it could be an unsafe product not shipped to the customer vs. shipped to the customer.

**Driving impacts**
Many factors can be responsible for driving food safety impacts, depending on whether a food safety culture is in cluster #1, 2, or 3. Two important factors can be identified in the scientific field of sociology: consequences and recognition.

**Consequences**
Braksick et al. brought forward the seemingly simple sociology model of the ‘ABC’ (Figure 2). The theory shows how antecedents (A) influence behaviour (B) but not as much as consequences (C). Antecedents are all the tools in our box that help us gain an understanding of what is required of us, e.g. training, standard operating procedures, job descriptions, stimulus, policy, stated expectations, job aids, circumstances, events and past experience. Consequences, on the other hand, are the feedback we gain from our behaviours, e.g. mention in the CEO’s weekly message, salary increase, peer award and a simple thank you. Braksick argues that many companies spend up to 80% of their effort on ‘A’ and 20% on ‘C’, when in fact, from a social-psychology perspective, ‘C’ impacts 80% of why we behave in a certain way against 20% for ‘A’. It is not difficult to see how cluster #1 drives the desired behaviours by overemphasising ‘C’ in a strategic and planned manner.

**Recognition**
Another factor that impacts a person’s willingness to put courage over comfort is recognition. The Work Human Institute of Globoforce conducted a study in 2017 to quantify the impact of leaders recognising employees and the employees’ trust in their leaders. They found that recognition not only increased trust (from 34% to 82%), depending on leaders’ habits of recognising their employees, but also that in those companies where leaders showed strong recognition of employees, there was 50% less turnover of staff.

**Actions to put courage ahead of comfort**
We need to embrace the thinking of organisational psychologist Gary Klein, who has researched extensively on what makes us discover new solutions. Klein defines one end of the continuum as ‘stupid’, where organisations and individuals are gripped by flawed beliefs, there is a lack of experience and a passive stance is taken to the status quo. At the other end of the continuum, we find organisations which have escaped the fixation on flawed beliefs, have more experience and take an active stance. By recognising this continuum, you can decide whether your organisation’s food safety culture is driven by stupidity or insights and choose to take action accordingly.

**Conclusions**
Food businesses should encourage their employees to walk the talk and hold people around them accountable for walking the talk. Staff should recognise the food safety behaviour of others and actively manage the consequences – positive and negative. As a team you can ensure your organisation’s culture of food safety is assessed and that there is a linked or integrated plan to drive change.