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Organizational Behavior: Forgotten Variable in Safe Food

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Abstract
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by David Walczak

The war on foodborne illness in hotels and restaurants is based on microbiology and critical control points. The author argues that cooks, managers, instructors, researchers, and regulators need to start looking beyond this narrow base to include more organizational behavior processes in their arsenal.

In a recent survey conducted by ABC News, 38 percent of respondents said they worry about food poisoning; 52 percent think that fast-food restaurants are not doing a good job ensuring food safety, and 62 percent believe it is safer to eat at home than in a restaurant.[1] While the Centers for Disease Control are currently reviewing the statistics, it is estimated that there are between 40 and 81 million cases of foodborne illnesses every year in the United States, resulting in 9,100 deaths.[2]

Culinary schools, hotels and restaurants, food processors, and government agencies are doing their best to fight the war on germs. However, people still get sick from eating in hotels and restaurants.[3] One of the reasons for this may be the narrow microbiological base upon which the battle plans are drawn. The major argument in this article is that culinary and hospitality management instructors, hotel and restaurant managers, and government regulators need to start looking beyond the microbiology of sanitation at critical control points and include more of the human aspects of clean and sanitary production[4] in the war on germs.

In Florida, culinary and hospitality management students take required courses in sanitation,[5] and every five years, food managers are required to pass a sanitation exam administered by the state.[6] In college classes, training sessions, and workshops, students and staff learn about the microorganisms responsible for food contamination, the times and temperatures necessary for fighting bacteria, proper food-handling techniques, the importance of personal

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hygiene, and hazard analysis and critical control points (NACCP).[7]

In 1995 and 1996, the author worked full time as a garde manger cook at a major five-diamond resort hotel in Florida. From November through April, the hotel employed about 100 cooks who worked in five kitchens preparing food for the two main dining rooms, a beach club, a golf-course café, room service, banquets, off-premise catering, and an employee cafeteria. While at the hotel, the author observed many sanitation violations,[8] including cooks and supervisors intentionally violating known sanitation rules and regulations during the preparation, cooking, and holding critical control points. Organizational behavior concepts can provide as understanding of why these sanitation breakdowns occurred. By focusing on real-life shop-floor behaviors and processes, management can complement its current efforts at fighting foodborne illness which, in turn, should help managers achieve their goal of producing profitable, tasty, attractive, and safe food.

Literature provides insight

What are some of the organizational behaviors and processes that can circumvent management's goal of producing safe food in hotels and restaurants? While there are no research studies that address this topic directly, some insights can be gained from sanitation textbooks and recent studies on cooks.

Ronald Cichy discusses people-related sanitation issues at the preparation, cooking, and holding critical control points.[9] During the preparation phase, staff must wear hair constraints and clean uniforms, which are not to be worn to and from work. Good personal hygiene is essential. Smoking and eating are not permitted in food preparation areas, and disposable tasting spoons should be used when testing food prepared for customers. Regular hand washing is critical. Florida sanitation statutes recommend that staff wash hands for 20 seconds. Unauthorized people are not permitted in food preparation areas. All of these standards should also be followed at the cooking and holding control points. In addition, Cichy mentions that accuracy in following recipes and staff training in times and temperatures are important people issues at the latter two critical control points, respectively.

This information is typical of the behavioral aspects of sanitation taught to students, managers, cooks, and regulators.[10] To be sure, in his discussion of the cooking control point and people, Cichy mentions the antagonistic relationship that exists in some establishments between production and service people. Cichy states that this conflict "creates an atmosphere of hostility which is not conducive to achieving the (sanitation) goals of the operation."[11] He suggests that managers should have cooks and servers trade places occasionally so they

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might gain an understanding of the others' job responsibilities. This antagonistic relationship between cooks and servers is a good example of real-life shop-floor behavior. It is not a major concern in sanitation textbooks, nor is it a topic included on certification exams or inspection checklists; however, because it can contribute to the production of unsafe food, it should be included in sanitation courses, workshops, and training sessions, as well as on checklists and exams.

When discussing the relationship between the holding control point and people, Cichy identifies another organizational process which can affect the production of safe food. Cichy says that "limited resources (people, equipment, and facilities) make it difficult for food service operations to approximate the ideal flow," i.e., the flow necessary to keep food that is being held for long periods of time free of contamination.[12]

Sanitation can suffer

Gary Alan Fine offers an additional insight into the human aspects of clean and sanitary production. According to Fine, line cooks take shortcuts which are "improper choices that bend or break the rules of production, but that save time and effort."[13] Trade-offs are one specific type of shortcut. Fine found that "the challenge of cooking efficiently and pleasantly while maintaining standards of hygiene is a trade-off, even if it is not always explicitly recognized."[14] Cooks can be under tremendous pressure to produce tasty and attractive food in a cost-effective manner. Given that food poisoning is difficult to trace, a fact cooks know well, they might trade off sanitation concerns for production priorities. Sanitation trade-offs are recognized by the Educational Foundation of the National Restaurant Foundation and supported by additional research,[15] but knowledge of them is not required in order to be certified in sanitation as a cook or food manager in Florida.

The following additional organizational behavior issues relating to sanitation violations were observed by the author: informal work norms, fatigue, work stress, working while sick, and organizational culture.[16] While cooks are usually given a lunch break, an informal norm exists among the cooks and supervisors that restricts them from taking this break until all the preparation and finishing work is complete. This encourages them to eat at their work stations, which is a violation of sanitation rules and regulations. Often, cooks are too tired to clean and sanitize properly. This is especially the case during the winter season in Florida which runs from approximately December through April. During the season, cooks work long hours. Mandatory overtime is common. They are given short notice of infrequent and irregular days off. Because of their low pay, many cooks work two jobs, both of which require standing for long periods of time. Cooks therefore find

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themselves with little energy to clean and sanitize, and when they do, it is only in the most perfunctory manner. Even if cooks are not necessarily fatigued, they do experience much stress during the workday.

During the season, cooks usually have too much work, not enough help or advanced notice to complete the required workload, and many interruptions due to poor planning, add-ons, or accidents. Yet, the organization depends on them to be at work, so cooks come to work sick, with their symptoms masked by heavy doses of cold and flu medicine. They may be free of visible symptoms, but the virus is still present. On the other hand, because of low wages and the seasonal nature of the food service business in Florida, cooks feel that they must work in spite of their illness. Many cooks came to work sick, but they were never observed being sent home or rerouted to non-food service related jobs.

Nor did management create a culture in which sanitation was important. Management paid only lip service to sanitation issues. Sanitation training was organized and delivered poorly. While culinary managers would fine a cook for not being cleanly shaven, they sent a contradictory message by not cleaning up after preparing or cooking food. It was clearly stated in the cooks' manual that disposable tasting spoons were to be used, but none were supplied to the cooks. Bottom-line consciousness was the preeminent concern of the culinary management team which also seemed willing to trade sanitation concerns for efficient production priorities.

Training needs new focus

While the literature provides some insights into the human aspects of clean and sanitary production, most of the current information is limited and speculative, and lacks depth. The observations of sanitation violations made by Fine and Walczak offer important ethnographic insights, but neither study is generalizable to other restaurants or hotels. Also, many question have not been asked or remain unanswered, and the relationships between variables have not been studied.

For example, antagonistic relationships between cooks and servers can undermine the production of safe food, but so also might the conflict between cooks and stewards, cooks and managers, etc. In addition, there is a question about the roles age, education, gender, race, and occupational status play. That cooks engage in trade-offs is firmly established, but why are they in a position to have to choose between making customers sick or avoiding reprimands for slack production?

It is well known that successful sanitation programs need the support of upper-level management, but why does management pay only lip service to sanitation, send contradictory messages, and not follow the guidelines set out in the company manual? How do other organizational behaviors

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and processes such as alienation from work, job dissatisfaction, intolerance for diversity, racism, sexism, limited opportunities for promotion, and high turnover relate to sanitation violations? As it stands, the current research in this area is inadequate. It offers some insights into how organizational behavior may contribute to the spread of foodborne illness during the preparation, cooking, and holding control points in hotels and restaurants; however, a deeper, clearer, more thorough understanding must await further, more rigorous, and systematic investigation.

Food safety is issue

In 1997, President Clinton launched the National Food Safety Initiative to address U.S. food safety concerns. On August 25, 1998, Executive Order 13100 established the President's Council on Food Safety, the purpose of which is to develop a comprehensive science-based strategy to improve the nation's food safety. Among other topics, the strategic plan should address management issues regarding food safety from farm to fork, production to consumption.[17] Consistent with this effort, in the commercial food service industry, federal and state agencies and professional associations are focusing on food handler education and training; train-the-trainer education programs, including certification training; and hazard analysis and critical control point model development, training, and education. However, while these efforts are important and helpful, they are too narrowly focused and need to be expanded to include more organizational behavior principles.

The culinary school and the general education department at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale are currently seeking funding from the United States Department of Agriculture, Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), Special Research Grants Program on Food Safety Research to begin investigating how organizational behaviors and processes can undermine management's sanitation goals. Cooks and hospitality management students enrolled in culinary classes will be trained in basic organizational behavior concepts and employed as participant observers at cooperating restaurants to gather data which they will analyze in order to evaluate how social processes affect the preparation, cooking, and holding of safe food. The major objective is to not only train the industry leaders of tomorrow, but to share findings with interested others through educational and training programs.

Because of the lack of research in this area, scientific-based policy implications cannot be drawn at this time. However, legislators charged with developing sanitation law may want to follow the current discussion regarding prescription errors among pharmacists in Florida.[18] Pharmacists' workloads (too many prescriptions

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to fill), staffing levels (too few pharmacists to fill prescriptions), a high-stress work environment, and the use of low-wage, minimally-trained technicians working in for-profit organizations with acute bottom-line consciousness have all been implicated in the rise of prescription errors. In an attempt to gain control of this situation, state legislators are stressing improvement over punishment, involving voluntary guidelines that include periodic meetings among organization members to review errors and suggest prevention strategies. Even though the occupations are so different, the social aspects of production, which can lead to customer illness, seem to be quite similar. Therefore, perhaps state legislators could begin discussing a similar strategy for combating sanitation violations in the hospitality industry.

Another step would be to include some organizational behavior concerns in culinary and hospitality management courses, training sessions, and workshops, as well as on certification exams. In a chapter entitled "Educating Foodservice Personnel in Food Sanitation," Longree and Armbruster[19] list the course content of a sanitation training course. The subject matter should include elements of microbiology, parasites in food, transmission of pathogens, causes of foodborne illnesses, reservoirs of microorganisms, sources of food contamination and control measures, multiplication of bacteria, and agencies concerned with food protection. Analysis would suggest a possible ninth topic, organizational behavior.

Sanitation should be a preeminent concern at all levels in the organization, especially among those who work directly with food. The author observed sanitation violations by the executive chef and sous chef, as well as area supervisors and cooks.[20] Consistent with a total quality management approach, chefs at all levels need to continue to learn about the microbiology of food safety and critical control points, but they must also be introduced to the role played by the social dimension as well. All food handlers and managers need to accept responsibility for sanitation and be ever vigilant for ways to make food safer.

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[1] ABC News, "Eat, Drink, and Be Wary," November 17, 1997.

[2] Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, "Fear of Food: Illnesses Fuel Demand for Tougher Laws," *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel,* October 25, 1998: 18A.

[3] See the following for two recent examples: Stephanie Artero, "Foodborne Virus is Blamed for Restaurant Patrons' Illness," *The Palm Beach Post,* February 27, 1998: 2B; Mary Warejcka, "Illnesses Blamed on Rare Outbreak of Toxin," *The Palm Beach Post,* July 18, 1998: 1B.

[4] The acronym HACSP is a term coined by the author to focus management's attention on the human aspects of clean and sanitary production. It is pronounced the same way as HACCP to make it easy to remember, but the different spelling will help call attention to the social dimension.

[5] Required courses in sanitation are based on microbiology and critical control points. Organizational behavior principles were not covered in courses taken in 1994-95 while the author was a student at the

Florida Culinary Institute, during training sessions while employed as a full-time cook in the garde manager kitchen at a five-diamond resort hotel in Florida, nor in workshops currently taught by the author which prepare food managers for the Florida state certification exam. A review of catalogues from culinary and hospitality management schools and programs in South Florida (Florida Culinary Institute, Palm Beach Community College, Broward Community College, Miami-Dade Community College, the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, Johnson and Wales, and Florida International University) also reveals the focus on microbiology and critical control points and not on the organizational behavior aspects of clean and sanitary production.

[6] Section 61C-4.023 Manager Certification and Public Food Service Employee Training of the 1995 Florida Food Code states: "Those managers who successfully pass the certification examination shall be issued a certificate which is valid for a period of five years from the date of issuance."

[7] For an introduction to HACCP guidelines and their application to commercial food service establishments see R. F. Cichy, *Sanitation Management,* 2nd ed. (East Lansing, Mich.: Educational Institute of the American Hotel & Motel Association, 1993), or J. K. Loken, *The HACCP Food Safety Manual* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995).

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[9] Cichy.

[10] Educational Foundation of the National Restaurant Association, *Foodservice Sanitation* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1985); Norman Marriott, *Principles of Food Sanitation* (Westport, Conn.: AVI Publishing, 1985); Karla Longree and Gertrude Armbruster, *Quantity Food Production,* 5th ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996).

[11] Cichy: 220.

[12] Ibid.: 228.

[13] G. A. Fine, *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1996): 220.

[14] Ibid.: 228.

[15] Educational Foundation of the National Restaurant Association, *Foodservice Sanitation* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1985): 126; D. Walczak (April 1997): 70.

[16] D. Walczak (April 1997); D. Walczak, "The Proletarian Gourmet," *FIU Hospitality Review* (Fall 1997).

[17] Federal Register, 63, No. 166 (August 27, 1998): 45661-2.

[18] B. LaMendola, "Workloads Overwhelm Pharmacists: Errors Fuel Increase in Fears," *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel,* October 25, 1998: 1.

[19] Longree and Armbruster: 438.

[20] Walczak, (April 1997).

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