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## Food Safety in Restaurants: A Human Relations Model

#### **Abstract**

Barry Reece and Rhonda Brandt use a human relations perspective to explain behavior at work. Following a review of the six components of their model, the author presents research to illustrate how it can be used by managers to help them understand why food safety violations occur in restaurants. An additional variable not included in the model is discusses and recommendations for managers are made.

#### Keywords

David Walczak, Food and Beverage

# Food safety in restaurants: A human relations model

by David Walczak

Barry Reece and Rhonda Brandt use a human relations perspective to explain behavior at work. Following a review of the six components of their model, the author presents research to illustrate how it can be used by managers to help them understand why food safety violations occur in restaurants. An additional variable not included in the model is discussed and recommendations for managers are made.

data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) show a decrease in the number of foodborne illnesses in the United States between 1996 and 1999, from 51.2 cases per 100,000 to 46.9, many people still get food poisoning. The CDC estimate that 76 million Americans suffer from foodborne illness yearly; 325,000 are hospitalized, and 5,000 die. Odds are that 1 in 4 people will get food poisoning and 1 in 840 will be hospitalized.1

Food service workers are not doing their best to win the war on foodborne illness. Two recent studies found that only 5.3 percent

of respondents know that improper cooling of food is the leading cause of food poisoning, and 18.1 percent know that food handlers must wash their hands for 20 seconds. There is also much confusion over the correct temperatures to cook food in order to kill bacteria, and knowledge of specific food preparation practices such as handling poultry, cooking eggs, and preparing food in advance is inadequate.

#### Violations exist

According to a recent U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) study, 40 percent of the observations made by FDA inspectors in full-service restaurants found food safety violations of the U.S. Food Code; 26 percent of observations in fast-food restaurants violated these standards. For both types of restaurants, food held at improper times or temperatures was the most frequent violation, followed by poor personal hygiene, including improper hand washing, bare-

FIU Hospitality Review

hand contact with ready-to-eat food, as well as eating, drinking, sneezing, coughing, and the use of tobacco while working with food. Failure to clean and sanitize food contact surfaces was also a persistent violation.<sup>3</sup> In a survey conducted by an independent polling firm, 47 percent of back-of-the-house employees say they would not suggest eating where they work!<sup>4</sup>

While these recent studies, reports, and surveys document the food safety problems that exist in restaurants, they do not explain why these problems exist. In an attempt to fill this void, Walczak found that food safety violations are the result of such organizational behavior processes as antagonistic relationships between production and service personnel, shortcuts or trade-offs taken by employees, informal work norms, fatigue, work stress, working while sick, organizational culture, and management philosophy.5 He also found that food code violations occur because many restaurant managers continue to only pay lip service to food safety issues, and employees are not trained properly, nor given the proper equipment or enough time to clean and sanitize.6 However. Walczak does not provide a framework for managers which would help them focus their attention on these behaviors. He provides examples rather than a systematic guide to understanding. What follows is a model that will help managers understand why food safety violations occur, which in turn, should help them be better prepared to fight the war on foodborne illnesses in their establishments.

#### Model provides framework

In the book *Human Relations:* Principles and Practices, Barry L. Reece and Rhonda Brandt describe six major forces that influence behavior at work. Work behavior can be influenced by organizational culture, supervisor-management relations, work group, work task, personal characteristics of the worker, and family life.<sup>7</sup>

There is lack of agreement over the definition of organizational culture.8 However, most analysts. including Reese and Brandt, agree that values are an essential component of culture. Supervisormanagement influences include philosophy, competence, and leadership style. The work group can satisfy social needs, provide emotional support, as well as assist in solving problems and meeting goals. The way the job is structured influences meaningfulness, responsibility, knowledge of results, variety, challenge, and personal growth. An individual's abilities, interests, values, and expectations can also affect behavior at work. Finally, family life has been found to be related to absenteeism, tardiness, and turnover.

Reece and Brandt do an excellent job of showing how the six components in their model influence behavior at work in a variety of settings. They do not show how these variables relate to safe food

handling in restaurants. This extension of their model is described below. See Table 1 for details.

#### Food safety is issue

In trying to understand why restaurants have such trouble retaining staff, Victor Wishna cites several well-known explanations: low pay, stressful schedules, no benefits, bleak future, better opportunities elsewhere, lack of personorganization fit, and no intention to stay. "However," Wishna continues, "equally if not more often cited are 'organizational culture' issues such as strained relationships with

bosses or co-workers, unfair treatment, even harassment." The following will show how organizational culture also plays an important role in food safety.

The key is for management to make food safety a core organizational value. But this is not always the case. Walczak found that managers and supervisors did little more than pay lip service to sanitation. Sanitation training was not valued; it was organized poorly and delivered ineptly. Important information on personal hygiene was missing from a 14-page Culinary Team Mission statement which was

# Table 1 Human relations and food safety

#### Culture

Low value placed on food safety
Management only pays lip service to sanitation
Low priority given to food safety training
Management does not sanction food safety violations
Inadequate or nonexistent sick leave policy

#### Supervisor-management influences

Focus on efficiency and production priorities creates pressure on employees to seek sanitation shortcuts and trade-offs

#### Work group

Informal group norms promote eating at work station during food preparation

#### Work task

High volume, repetition, monotony, and pace encourage eating at station during food preparation and promote fatigue

#### Personal characteristics

Strong work ethic and pride create desire to work through injury or illness

#### Family influences

Need for further study

FIU Hospitality Review

written in English, even though many of the staff could not read this language well enough to understand it. Cooks were never tested on food safety knowledge or practices. In addition, there was little effort to enforce the guidelines spelled out in the manual.

To give one example, cooks frequently used their fingers to taste the food they were preparing. The seasonings usually needed adjustment before testing a second time. If the cook wasn't sure about the taste, other cooks would be asked for their opinions. It was not uncommon for several cooks to dip their fingers into the food being prepared. Contrary to this practice (and consistent with sanitary food preparation practices), the culinary mission statement specified: "Be sure to taste all products you are using with your disposable tasting spoon, which must be kept at each station." When workers asked the chef about this, he alluded to some plastic spoons that no one knew existed, and which were difficult to find. The chef's remark became a standing joke in the kitchen; from then on cooks seldom tested food without pretending to use the mythical disposable tasting spoons.

#### Training is necessary

According to Brady Daniels, vice president of Audits International, "If food safety is just paid lip service, it becomes a one-time thing. It has to be a buy-in from the top down." Restaurant managers will not win the war on foodborne illness until they place a high priority on food safety, clearly artic-

ulate the normative behavior necessary to achieve these goals, socialize or train properly, and sanction violations from sanitation norms or standards.

McDonald's is an example of a highly efficient organization that makes food safety an essential component of its organizational culture. "Cleaning is a perpetual activity at McDonald's... when the store opens it is spotless... as soon as the first customer arrives, the cleaning commences." Polisoto and Fernandez continue as follows:

Glistening stainless steel appliances behind the counter provide an up-to-date, efficient, and sanitary appearance. Above all, everything is clean. The exceptional cleanliness achieved by endless sweeping of the floors, and mopping, rapid garbage removal, instant collection of dirty trays and cleaning of spills, continual washing of windows to remove fingerprints, rapid cleaning of unoccupied tables, and the constant wiping of the counter.12

Reese and Brandt include management philosophy, competence, and leadership style in the second component of their model. They say that employees' perception of management's philosophy can influence "such important factors as productivity, customer relations, safety consciousness, and loyalty to the firm."

#### The chef rules

The predominant management philosophy and leadership style in

most hotel and restaurant kitchens is authoritarian, bureaucratic, Theory X. Power and control are in the hands of the chef, i.e., "The stick is the rule... because the carrots must be used for stocks and salads." Cooks control their tools and have little influence over anything else.

This philosophy and style are described by Anthony Bourdain in his book Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly. Bourdain states, "Ultimately, I want a 'Yes, Sir!' If I want an opinion from my line cooks, I'll provide one." He continues: "In my kitchens, I'm in charge, it's always my ship, and the tenor, tone, and hierarchy-even the background music-are largely my doing."15 Efficiency and production priorities are all that matter. "All that's important is 'Get the food out, screw everybody, don't care, got to make money.' There's no dignity to it."16

#### Cleaning is neglected

With the focus on producing large quantities of high-quality food in short cycles, cleaning and sanitizing often take a back seat to getting the product out. Gary Alan Fine provides an insight into how a focus on efficient production priorities can undermine food safety goals. Shortcuts are improper choices that bend or break the rules of production in order save time and effort. 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."17

Cooks are under tremendous pressure to produce tasty and attractive food in a cost-effective manner. Since food poisoning is difficult to trace, a fact cooks know well, they might trade off sanitation concerns for production priorities. Walczak found that the executive chef did not want cooks and dishwashers using steel wool to clean pots, pans, and floor kettles, when a saucier showed him a scouring pad hidden in water in a plastic bucket covered by a towel behind a floor kettle.18 The chef had a good reason for this ban; tiny shavings of steel can remain in pans after cleaning and contaminate the next food item. Yet the proscription was never announced at a meeting or written in the mission statement book. Using steel wool is a calculated risk, but cooks face an unpleasant choice: Use it or be written up for being too slow to prepare the food.

Another example of how the pressure to produce can circumvent food safety goals involves the tabletop slicer used for cutting meat, cheese, fruit, and vegetables. Food codes dictate that the slicer must be cleaned and sanitized after each use. However, under pressure to meet deadlines, cooks simply take their side towel (or any other towel) and quickly wipe off visible soil. Eventually the slicer becomes so dirty that someone has to break it down for a complete cleaning. The unfortunate cook who loses the game of "slicer roulette" is the next one who needs to use it. Most of the time "cleaning" consists of running the removable parts under hot water, an action that does not even closely approximate industry standards. Often chefs are also guilty of not properly cleaning and sanitizing the slicer after using it.

#### Safety can be core

An authoritarian management style does not necessarily lead to food safety violations. Charlie Trotter, owner and operator of arguably one of the best restaurants in the world, is an example.

In the bustling kitchens of fine restaurants, the traditional chefs' hierarchy is a rigid and exacting arrangement. Complete with the culinary equivalent of generals, captains, and lieutenants, the chefs' "brigade system" mimics a military chain of command. Having evolved in nineteenth-century France, this system delegates precise responsibilities to each member of the kitchen staff, ensuring the efficiency, pride, and professionalism required to create a complex and artful meal... You might think the brigade system was designed expressly for Charlie Trotter.19

The difference between Trotter's authoritarian style and that of other managers is the focus on food safety as a core value. At Trotter's, sanitation receives center-of-the-plate attention. Trotter has an incomparable focus on minute details. "Your job is to identify every

detail involved in the daily running of your business and, when possible, set standards for each one. Think about every nook and cranny in your facility and set standards for cleanliness, tidiness, order, organization, and appearance." In terms of sanitation, this includes constantly wiping clean countertops and cleaning carpets regularly.

To pick up lint balls, debris, and crumbs from the dining floor in his restaurant, Trotter "developed double-sided adhesive strips that employees would stick to the bottom of their shoes" which allows them to discreetly remove clutter without disturbing the guests. He also suggests that employees be trained "to discreetly bend over and pick up garbage by hand." Chefs arrive neatly groomed and impeccably dressed. Trotter requires employees to "wear clothing that is clean, pressed, and unstained, plus request(s) they be clean-shaven and well groomed." On one occasion, after a longtime customer had too much to drink, each and every time she had to visit the "a service person bathroom. escorted her to the rest room, opened the door, checked to be sure it was spotless, and ensured the towels and toilet paper were stocked and neatly arranged."20

#### Tasks are stressful

The work group and work task are the next two components of Reece and Brandt's model. With reference to the former, Walczak found that an informal norm

existed among cooks in the garde manger kitchen that restricted them from taking their lunch break until all the preparation and finishing work was complete. This encouraged eating at the work station, which is a violation of sanitation rules and regulations.<sup>21</sup>

The task of professional cooking is fast paced, repetitive, and stressful. According to Bourdain:

Line cooking, the real business of preparing the food you eat—is more about consistency, about mindless, unvarying repetition, the same series of tasks performed over and over and over again exactly the same way... Chefs require blind, near-fanatical loyalty, a strong back and an automaton-like consistency of execution under battle-field conditions.

In order to prepare 500 beef Wellingtons, "the whole line would break formation, drag long work tables to the center of the kitchen and re-form as a production line like you'd expect to see in an automobile assembly line."<sup>22</sup>

Take, for example, a simple citrus salad with hearts of palm for 800 guests.<sup>23</sup> Each plate consists of one piece of Belgium endive, two pieces of lolla rosa baby lettuce, three orange sections, three half pieces of grapefruit, four ounces of sliced hearts of palm, with a fine brunoise of red pepper and chive garnish. Two cases of endive must be opened, cut, and separated. Three cases of lolla rosa must be opened, cut, separated, and

washed. Over 200 oranges and 100 grapefruit need to be washed, skinned, and sectioned or, with the grapefruit, washed, skinned, cut in half, and sliced. More than five-dozen cans of hearts of palm need to be opened, drained, removed from the can, and cut on the bias. Finally, about one dozen red peppers must be cut, cleaned, washed, cut brunoise, and combined with about 10 bunches of chives, also cut brunoise.

The prep work usually takes place the day before the item is to be served. Finishing the item is as routine as the preparation. To present the citrus salad, 200 sheet pans, each holding four plates, are laid out in four rows on the tables. Each row consists of 10 sheet pans stacked five high. Four plates are placed on the top sheet pan in each row. Then the final assembly of the plate begins.

This procedure is repeated until the 800 plates are completed. Then the prep work for the next day begins. While the specific plate and the exact number being prepared and presented changes, the monotony does not.

#### Repetition is present

The repetition specific to prep work and presentation is characteristic of each station in the pantry. So, too, is the speed at which the work is to be accomplished: fast, fast, fast. Repetitive, fast-paced work from which there is no break encourages cooks to eat at their work station.

With the focus on producing such large quantities of high-quality

items, cleaning and sanitizing are downplayed. Before one meal is finished, the supervisor is usually barking out orders to get the next meal prepared. By the time the shift is nearing an end, cooks are too tired to clean and sanitize.

Of the six components in the Reece and Brandt model, the effects of personal characteristics and family life on food safety are the least studied. Cooks possess a very strong work ethic and take much pride in what they do. Often, cooks work through injury or illness. In Walczak's experience, it seemed that someone was always coughing, sniffling, and/or sneezing. One cook told him that you need three things in your toolbox to make it through the season: "burn cream, bandages, and aspirin." Another cook said, "They have Advil in the candy machine—this should tell you something about working here."24 Cooks work with their illness masked by heavy doses of cold and flu medicine. They may be free of visible symptoms, but the virus or bacterium is still present. Seldom are cooks sent home or rerouted to non-food-related jobs.

There is a reciprocal relationship between work and family life. In "Compromising Positions," Elizabeth Bernstein discusses the potential negative consequences restaurant work has on family life. Working 10 to 12 hour days, nights, weekends, and holidays, as well as late hours, travel, and work-related entertaining are all cited as reasons why working in a restaurant affects home life. The effects on the spouse

and children cannot be overstated. Divorce is common. Because of recent studies showing a powerful tie between conditions at work and treatment of children at home, Reece and Brandt suggest that "children may be the unseen stakeholders in the workplace."<sup>25</sup>

No studies have been done on the reverse relationship. Managers will have to wait for future studies that investigate the relationship between domestic problems such as spouse abuse, child abuse, divorce, or juvenile delinquency, and attitudes and behavior toward food safety in restaurants.

#### Customers not included

The cook's relationship with customers is one factor not included in Reece and Brandt's model. Food safety violations are most likely to occur when a disgruntled customer sends a meal back to an even more disgruntled cook. This relationship and its implication for food safety are discussed by Gary Alan Fine. Fine says, "the narrative... in which a customer's sausage was supposedly dipped in urine is an extreme instance of backstage revenge. Spitting in a customer's soup is not unknown."<sup>26</sup>

Debra Ginsberg, a waitress with over 20 years' experience, describes a similar incident between the waitstaff and customers. "Tipchallenged customers who frequent the same spot get not only the worst service but leftover bread, dirty glasses, and plates that have been prodded at and sometimes eaten off... And yes, I have seen servers

spit in food and drinks."<sup>27</sup> Employees' failure to reprimand their colleagues for such behavior reinforces the need for managers to maintain vigilance and take action.

How do restaurant managers begin to combat food safety violations consistent with the Reece and Brandt model? Spending more on high-tech solutions, such chillers and ovens that meet Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) standards, will not work because the behaviors are not amenable to critical point controls. Mandatory vaccinations are one way to combat the spread of illness. A more ample sick leave policy with a limited number of accruable paid days off could have the same effect. Games and contests such as safety bingo during which employees find unsafe conditions and identify them are a way of making work more fun and the workplace cleaner. However, as trainer Gary Hernbroth states, "It's more the work itself they should enjoy, not the contrived games."28

#### Work can change

The work itself can be changed using the same strategies currently employed to combat low retention rates. Training, cross-training, and growth and development strategies are ways by which managers try to reduce turnover, and they can also help fight food safety violations generated by boring, repetitive, mundane tasks. While initial training is important, follow-up training and more reinforcement

from company headquarters are equally important. Also, managers need to shorten the gap between food safety classes. Training needs to be reinforced constantly.

#### Supervisor has role

The management-supervisoremployee relationship also needs to be addressed. Nikki Leondakis, senior vice president for the Kimpton Group, operator of boutique hotels and restaurants in cities nationally, says:

The most important relationship is between the employee and the employee's immediate supervisor. Too many supervisors do not know how to work well with their people. A lot of our traditions are based on hundreds-of-years-old practices. Especially in the kitchen, where you hear phrases like 'classically trained,' which implies the old authoritarian model of a chef who's uncompromising and sometimes impossible. That doesn't work with the workforce of today.

She also recommends listening to employee suggestions for improving morale: "Recognition is a major reason people stick around. If we set up an environment where we show we care and compassion and flexibility for the needs of the staff, then we're going to be successful. It's not a real difficult formula." This is also good advice to counteract organizational behavior related to food safety violations.

The changes necessary to

combat food safety violations generated by organizational behavior will not happen unless the organization changes its culture. With reference to improving retention rates, the NRA Educational Foundation's President and CEO Reed Hayes says, "Underneath it all, what's called for...are changes in HR practices, but we're really talking about cultural changes."30 In order to prevent human relations-related food safety problems, managers must also focus on cultural changes necessary to prevent customers from getting sick.

Reece and Brandt provide a very useful model for understanding how human relations affects food safety. However, the data used to support the model are largely anecdotal or based on participant observation studies of single restaurants. The next step is to evaluate the effect of human relations on food safety attitudes and behaviors based on a national random sample of restaurant personnel.

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<sup>2</sup> R. Klara, "Playing it Safe," Restaurant Business (June 15, 1999): 30; P. Coleman, C. Griffith, and D. Botterill, "Welsh Caterers: An Exploratory Study of Attitudes Towards Safe Food Handling in the Hospitality Industry," International Journal of Hospitality Management 19, no. 2 (2000): 154.

<sup>3</sup> U. S. Food and Drug Administration, FDA Retail Food Program Database of Foodborne Illness Risk Factors (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> P. B. Dailey, editor, "Dining Downers,"

Restaurants and Institutions (January 15, 2000): 18.

<sup>5</sup> D. Walczak, "Organizational Behavior: Forgotten Variable in Safe Food," FIU Hospitality Review 17, nos. 1 & 2 (1999): 21-27.

<sup>6</sup> D. Walczak, "The Sanitation Imperative: Keep People from Getting Sick in Your Restaurant," Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly 38, no. 2 (April 1997): 68-73.

<sup>7</sup> B. L. Reece and R. Brandt, *Human Relations: Principles and Practices*, 4th ed. (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000)

8 Culture means different things to different analysts. According to Reece and Brandt, organizational culture refers to shared values, beliefs, norms, and language that create a common identity and foster a feeling of community among members. Edgar Schein, Organizational Culture and Leadership (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1985): 6, defines culture as "a pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaption and internal integration - that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems." For Schein, basic assumptions operate unconsciously, at a deeper level, in a taken-for-granted fashion. Culture becomes more visible, more concrete. as it is transformed through Level 2, Values, and Level 3, Artifacts. In their book The Cultures of Work Organizations (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993), Harrison Trice and Janice Beyer discuss the limitations of Schein's definition. "First, the very generality of the assumptions puts them on a rather rarified plane that is very different from the everyday concerns and preoccupations of members of organizations." Also, Schein's view of culture differs "from that of many anthropologists who assign symbols and cultural forms a more central role in culture" (42-43). Trice and Beyer refer to the substance of culture as ideologies. Ideologies are defined as "shared, relatively coherently interrelated sets of emotionally charged beliefs, values, and norms that bind some people together and help them make sense of their worlds (33). While ideologies are abstractions, cultural forms are their concrete manifestation. Symbols, language, narratives, and practices are the "observable entities through which members of a culture

express, affirm, and communicate cultural substance to one another" (77).

- <sup>9</sup> V. Wishna, "Leaving for Good," Restaurant Business (May 1, 2000): 67.
  - 10 Walczak (1997), 69.
  - <sup>11</sup> Klara, 38.
- <sup>12</sup> C. Polisoto and A. Fernandez, "Visual Cultural Forms at McDonalds," in H. Trice and J. Beyer, *The Cultures of Work Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993): 88.
  - <sup>13</sup> Reece and Brandt, 10.
  - 14 Walczak (1999), 29.
- A. Bourdain, Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2000): 57, 256.
  - 16 Wishna, 65.
- 17 G. A. Fine, Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996): 228. Trade-offs are also recognized by the Educational Foundation of the National Restaurant Association, Foodservice Sanitation (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1985): 126.
- <sup>18</sup> This section and the next paragraph are taken from Walczak (1997), 70-71.
- <sup>19</sup> P. Clarke, Lessons in Excellence from Charlie Trotter (Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1999): 114.
  - 20 Ibid, 67, 93.
  - <sup>21</sup> Walczak (1997), 29.
  - <sup>22</sup> Bourdain, 56, 107.
- <sup>23</sup> The next three paragraphs are taken from Walczak (1997): 28-29.
  - <sup>24</sup> Ibid, 32.
- <sup>25</sup> E. Bernstein, "Compromising Positions," *Restaurant Business* (December 1, 1998): 35-40.
  - <sup>26</sup> Fine (1996), 151.
- <sup>27</sup> D. Ginsberg, Waiting: The True Confessions of a Waitress (New York: Harper-Collins, 2000): 34.
- <sup>28</sup> S. Brooks, "Funny Business," Restaurant Business (August 15, 1999): 24.
  - <sup>29</sup> Wishna, 72-74.
  - 30 Ibid, 70.

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