

When a Correction Isn't Enough:

# Using Training Bytes to Make Food Safety Behavior Stick

by Hal King, Ph.D., Active Food Safety

Restaurant managers correct food safety problems every day. An employee uses gloves incorrectly. A cook fails to verify the final cooking temperature. A food worker handles an allergen, and then touches another food without changing gloves. Someone fails to wash their hands when required. The manager sees the problem, intervenes, and tells the employee what to do, *e.g.*, recook that product to the right temperature. That immediate correction is important because it controls the food safety risk at that moment. But there is another question managers should be asking:

## Did we correct only the food—or did we correct the behavior that created the risk?

If the employee was never properly trained, does not completely understand the requirement, or has been observed making the same mistake more than once, simply telling the employee what to do may not be enough. This is where a short, focused **food safety training byte** can become part of the corrective action.

**Correcting the food protects the customer now. Correcting the behavior helps protect the next customer.**

## Knowing the Rule Is Not the Same as Following It

Research on food-handler training has repeatedly demonstrated an important challenge: training is generally effective at increasing food safety *knowledge*, but changing actual employee

*behavior* is more difficult. Studies comparing what employees know with what they actually do have found that improvements in observed food safety practices are often smaller than improvements in knowledge. That distinction matters in restaurants. An employee may know when handwashing is required and still fail to wash their hands during a busy shift. A cook may know the required cooking temperature but fail to use a thermometer consistently. An employee may understand allergen cross-contact during training but make the wrong decision when several orders are being prepared at once. The purpose of a food safety management system is not simply for employees to know the standards. The objective is consistent execution of those standards during actual restaurant operations.

## Turn the Observation Into a Learning Opportunity

A **training byte** is a very short learning intervention focused on one specific food safety behavior or requirement. The concept is similar to what training researchers call *microlearning*:

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short, focused learning delivered around a specific concept and incorporated into the workflow. For example, imagine that a manager observes an employee handling raw chicken, removing the gloves, and then starting another task without washing their hands. The manager must first stop the behavior and control the immediate risk. But instead of ending the corrective action there, the manager could provide a two-or-three minute training byte covering:

- Why handwashing is required after handling raw animal food
- When gloves should be removed
- The correct handwashing procedure
- When the procedure applies during restaurant operations
- A short employee demonstration of the correct behavior

The manager has now moved beyond correcting the event and has addressed the employee competency that contributed to it. The same approach could be used for cooking temperatures, cooling, sanitizer concentration, allergen cross-contact, glove use, ready-to-eat food handling, cleaning and sanitation, and employee illness reporting.

## From “Corrected on Site” to a Corrective Learning Cycle

Restaurant assessments frequently identify findings as “corrected on site.” That is necessary—but it does not necessarily mean the underlying risk has been corrected. Consider a cook who fails to reach the required final cooking temperature. The manager tells the cook to continue cooking the product until the correct temperature is reached. The food safety issue has been corrected. But what caused the failure? Does the employee know the required cooking temperature? Does the employee understand where and how to take the temperature? Is the thermometer being used correctly? Has this same employee made the mistake before? If those questions are not addressed, the same failure can occur during the next cook cycle. A stronger corrective-action model is:

### OBSERVE > CORRECT > TRAIN > DEMONSTRATE > RECHECK

- **Observe:** The manager identifies the food safety deviation.
- **Correct:** Control the immediate food safety hazard.

- **Train:** If there is a knowledge, skill, or repeat-performance gap, provide a short training byte focused specifically on that requirement.
- **Demonstrate:** Have the employee perform or explain the correct procedure.
- **Recheck:** Observe the employee again later to determine whether the behavior has been sustained.

### **The last step matters.**

Research in other safety-critical workplaces has shown that feedback can improve behaviors such as handwashing and glove use, but those improvements may decline when feedback and reinforcement stop. The goal therefore should not simply be to retrain the employee. The manager should verify later that the employee is actually performing the behavior correctly. A training byte should not be the end of the corrective action. The manager should come back and verify that the behavior changed.

### **Not Every Violation Requires More Training**

Managers should also recognize that not every food safety failure is a training failure. An employee may know exactly what to do but work in an environment that makes compliance difficult. For example:

- A handwashing sink may be inaccessible.
- Gloves may not be available at the workstation.
- Thermometers may be missing or malfunctioning.
- Staffing may be inadequate during peak periods.
- Workflows may make separation of raw and ready-to-eat foods difficult.
- Production expectations may unintentionally reward speed over food safety.

Retraining the employee will not solve those problems. Managers should therefore ask three questions when they observe a food safety deviation:

1. Does the employee not know what to do?
2. Does the employee know but need reinforcement or additional practice?
3. Does the employee know what to do, but the operating system makes the correct behavior difficult?

Training bytes can help address the first two. The third requires a management corrective action.

### **Practical Takeaway for Foodservice Operators**

Foodservice companies already invest heavily in employee training, restaurant assessments, third-party audits, and corrective actions. The opportunity is to connect these systems. When a manager or auditor identifies certain employee food safety failures, the finding could trigger a corresponding short training byte. The employee could complete the targeted retraining, demonstrate competency, and then be re-observed later. Instead of corrective actions simply documenting that a problem was fixed, the process begins to answer a much more important question:

### **Did the corrective action actually reduce the likelihood that the food safety failure will happen again?**

That is the difference between correcting an observation and using the observation to improve food safety performance via training.

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**Look for the full article by Hal King, Ph.D., Active Food Safety, coming soon to *Food Safety Magazine*.**