Audits and inspections, whether external/third-party or internal, are part of everyday life in a food plant. However, while internal audit training is officially requested by certification schemes, self-inspection skills and techniques are often more difficult to obtain.

One of the main reasons for the inefficiency of a self-inspection program is the associated fragmentation. Inspections occur every day for many different reasons, including pre-operation checks, post-cleaning evaluations, equipment sign-off after maintenance, line/batch change controls, etc. Although very effective in their field of scope, these inspections are highly focused to the area of concern, and normally will fail to detect other issues located nearby.

Further, people working in a certain department, line, or task will easily spot changes or unusual situations in their field of interest. For example, maintenance technicians will tend to see parts that need repair work, but will not notice cleaning inefficiencies. Self-inspection teams should be trained to think outside the box.

Training and culture within a company is very important. In a production area where temporary repairs and easy fixes are part of the everyday routine, personnel will tend to see these as normal and will not detect deteriorating tape or other similar issues. In a warehouse with structures that are difficult to access and clean, cobwebs and dust accumulate at perimeters or overhead and tend to be viewed as commonplace. Equipment that is deteriorated or rusty or has tack welds or flaking paint may seem unavoidable. In other words, if the plant culture is more “whatever works” instead of seeking an optimal solution, that will be reflected to personnel.

People who work in the same areas develop a certain mindset toward their responsibilities and everyday jobs that may blind them to certain issues. Self-inspection teams comprised of personnel with multi-disciplinary backgrounds will challenge the way things are done. Inspectors should be objective and should not be dedicated to the same areas or involved in cases where there might be a conflict of interest.

Inspection teams often take pictures of observations to help explain the issues to the departments involved in the problem. It is equally important that pictures of best practices are available so that technicians and operators are reminded of the goal. Photos of newly installed equip-
ment and new machines, parts, belts, or floors, and those taken after a very deep line cleaning can be an invaluable training aid.

The easiest way to conduct a self-inspection is by using a pre-set questionnaire. This is ideal for team members with limited experience and will provide evidence about what has been inspected and aspects that have been looked at, making sure that specific tasks are not overlooked. However, using a pre-set questionnaire as a self-inspection report can limit inspectors to look only for items on the list, causing issues in areas that are not included to be missed.

Self-inspections form an integral component of any effective food safety and quality management plan. A well-developed program needs to be established to ensure efficiency. Inspecting the whole facility, including any temporary buildings and support areas, external grounds, and the roof will help create a holistic view of the issues observed and cover all possible aspects.

Fresh eyes and different backgrounds will provide a multi-disciplinary approach. Frequency should be predetermined and defined according to the risk-assessment and processes involved. Implementation of the program should be monitored and a sign-off procedure should be included. An effective follow-up program will involve the different departments that need to be engaged in the problem-solving process and assess the actual accomplishments after corrective actions have been completed. Regular review of the program will ensure long-term effectiveness.

However, it is important to note that even a perfect program will not solve problems if not implemented properly. Operators and workers need to be trained, motivated, engaged, and well-equipped with the tools needed to perform the job. For example, a facility had a leakage problem in the internal raw material flour storage silos. The facility detected the issue and included some impressive graphs and calculations about new parts that needed to be installed or fixed, time and work-force allocations, downtime, and total cost estimates. But the problem was still present in the shop floor and there was an imminent food contamination issue because of stored-product pests thriving in this perfect growth environment. There is a fine line between establishing a program to solve non-conformities and actually doing the job that needs to be done in a timely manner. Balance between the two is crucial.

An effective self-inspection program cannot be established in an office environment. Procedures, training, and scheduling are needed, but the workers doing the work need to provide input on what is needed to complete the job efficiently, detect the issues and the extent of the problem to prioritize correctly, and provide immediate actions to eliminate damages. AIB

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