

SUPERVISORY AND FSMA TRAINING KEEPS FOOD MANUFACTURER A LEADER IN THE INDUSTRY

BACKGROUND

Tropical Cheese began as the dream of Rafael Mendez. Born in Las Villas, Cuba, Mr. Mendez came to the US at seventeen with \$50 and a dream. Armed with experience from working in his father's cafeteria he gravitated to the food industry, first making deliveries, then establishing a small milk route and finally starting Tropical Cheese in Perth Amboy NJ. Thirty plus years later this family owned business remains the favorite cheese of many Hispanic households because of the company's attention to detail and authenticity. Tropical Cheese, which operates in a state of the art manufacturing facility with 250 employees, is ISO and HACCP certified, uses the finest natural ingredients and employs award-winning cheese makers from around the world in its 67,000 sq ft facility.

CHALLENGE

The FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) is the most sweeping reform of the food safety laws in more than 70 years. It was signed into law on January 4, 2011 with its objective being to ensure the U.S. food supply is safe by shifting the focus from responding to contamination to preventing it. Food manufacturers have been working diligently to implement the law's requirement to ensure they are in compliance with the new regulations.

As part of Tropical Cheese's continuous improvement plan the company brought in its trusted process improvement partner New Jersey Manufacturing Extension Program, Inc. (NJMEP) to assist them in putting in place the new requirements.

SOLUTION

NJMEP began the process by conducting an assessment of Tropical Cheese. The assessment identified the lack of communication between departments. This resulted in each department not being aware of the other's tasks creating inefficiencies because each team's role directly impacts the efficiency of another department. With these findings NJMEP recommended that Tropical Cheese implement Supervisory Skills training that would work in conjunction with the FSMA related training that Tropical Cheese was planning.

Tropical Cheese and NJMEP worked closely to create a training plan that would not interfere with the demanding production requirements and be cost effective for the company.

NJMEP and its resource, Juan Ortiz, built and conducted a Supervisory Skills training program that covered Basics of Management, Leadership Skills and Managing Change & Performance.

Knowing the FSMA would be impacting many food manufacturers such as Tropical Cheese, NJMEP brought together companies for an Industry Specific Consortium Grant. Tropical Cheese and eighteen other NJ Food Manufacturers were trained in critical FSMA requirements. Consortium grants make it possible for companies who would not be able to meet direct grant requirements, for example 10 participants in a class, to benefit from the DOL programs.

"What the assessment uncovered helped us identify our specific personnel training needs. Also they look out for us in ways that helps us contain costs, such as the grant, and achieve certifications that keep us FSMA compliant." — Joseph Vicini, VP Manufacturing for Tropical Cheese

Four Tropical Cheese employees attended classes in Food Allergens, Internal Auditing and Corrective Action and Root Cause Analysis and SQF Practitioner training.

- Food Safety Training – Food Allergens addressed the major allergens and how to set up an effective allergen program to avoid cross contact and ensure food safety. Participants created a framework of the allergen program to be customized to their business.
- Food Safety Training – Internal Auditing enabled personnel to become qualified and confident to conduct internal audits as required by international quality management and food safety management systems. The fundamentals and phases of the audit process and including a number of practical exercises and case studies were used to facilitate the learning process. Further, the participants had the opportunity to create their individual internal audit plan during the training class.
- Food Safety Training – Internal Auditing for Food Safety Management Systems. Besides the fundamentals and phases of the audit process this class focuses in addition on the particular requirements of food safety management systems and how to evaluate effectiveness. Practical exercises and case studies will facilitate the learning process.
- Food Safety Training – Corrective Action and Root Cause analysis. Common methodologies of root cause analysis and how to apply them during case studies and practical exercises as well as the implementation of an effective corrective action process including

methodologies and evaluation of effectiveness are addressed in this class.

SQF Practitioner covered about the role and responsibilities of the SQF practitioner, the structure of the SQF code, SQF certification audits and scoring system, the “SQF system elements” and “Food Safety Fundamentals for food manufacturing.”

RESULTS

As a result of the Supervisory training the divide between departments and unwillingness to cooperate with one another improved. Employees became aware of how one person’s tasks directly impacts the outcome of another individual’s tasks. These changes greatly improved the work environment.

Required certifications were a result of the training provided by the FSMA Consortium Grant.

When responding to the NIST Survey Mr. Vincini reported that the training in addition to the operational impact financially impacted Tropical Cheese positively in a number of areas:

- **A \$24,000.00 COST SAVINGS**
- **SALES INCREASE OF \$58,000**

Retained \$19,000,000 in sales that could have been lost without the certifications that resulted from the FSMA training.

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