Tips for Developing a Successful PSA Lead Trainer Application

Applying to be a PSA Lead Trainer is a significant step because there is an expectation of having competency in four diverse areas. PSA Lead Trainers bear significant responsibility in assuring that each PSA Grower Training is successfully completed and that each attendee receives a quality experience that provides them with information they need to comply with the FSMA Produce Safety Rule (PSR) regulatory requirements. It is important for all PSA Lead Trainer applicants to consider if they are qualified and ready to proceed with the application. It is critically important to have PSA Lead Trainers located throughout the U.S. and globally so that growers who want and need to attend a PSA Grower Training have access to qualified trainers conducting courses. For this reason, the PSA team would like to share some of the things we have observed and learned since implementing the PSA Lead Trainer Review Process. We hope that this article provides additional information that will help PSA Trainers address deficiencies noted in previous PSA Lead Trainer Applications and help new applicants move smoothly through the application process. Having a cadre of qualified and experienced PSA Lead Trainers to deliver accurate and effective trainings to produce growers will help growers enhance the safety of their produce and meet the requirements of the PSR.

Several people have asked us to share why applications do not make it through the review process. Most unsuccessful PSA Lead Trainer Applications are declined because there are deficiencies in both foundational experiences and the responses to the supplemental questions on the PSA Lead Trainer Application. Generally, we find that the majority of unsuccessful PSA Lead Trainer Applications fall into four broad categories: lack of produce safety training experience, lack of knowledge of the PSR, lack of on-farm experience, and lack of relevant educational background.

Expert tip: Many of the questions asked on the PSA Supplemental Application are questions growers have asked during a PSA Grower Training. A successful response demonstrates the applicant’s ability to communicate the related PSR requirements, along with Good Agricultural Practices that support the PSR requirements, in a way that a grower would understand.
The most common deficiency noted in the PSA Trainer Application is lack of relevant training experience. Gaining additional experience by co-training with a PSA Lead Trainer is an ideal way to directly address deficiencies in training experience, while also facilitating a better understanding of the curriculum. The PSR is relatively new to everyone, including the PSA team and those who have been teaching GAPs for decades. Teaching this new material and answering questions during training helps trainers become more intimately acquainted with the PSR, how it applies to farms, and what challenges the new requirements present to growers. Trainers often will confuse audit requirements with PSR requirements, so it is important to know the difference. This is also important since lack of PSR knowledge is another reason why applications are determined to be deficient. Co-training also encourages trainers to see things from the grower’s point of view. This helps trainers anticipate their questions, respond to questions in a practical way, and become more empathetic to the challenges that growers face. Teaching other produce safety courses or giving presentations on the PSR may also be beneficial, especially in situations where the applicant does not have the opportunity to co-train during a PSA Grower Training Course.

Keep in mind that PSA Lead Trainers are expected to stay up-to-date with FDA announcements and guidance. As new information is released, it may change answers to some of the questions, so it is very important that PSA Lead Trainer Applicants read and become familiar with this information. This can be done by visiting the [FDA webpage on the PSR](https://www.fda.gov) and by signing up for [email updates](https://www.fda.gov). This is a good practice since it is imperative the PSA Lead Trainers stay current with any changes. The PSA team offers monthly [Produce Safety Educator Calls](https://www.producesafetyalliance.cornell.edu) to facilitate information exchange and sends information through the PSA Trainer and Lead Trainer listserv.

Another reason applicants are sometimes declined is lack of on-farm experience. While this can be more difficult to address for an applicant who is not connected to the farming community, having an in-depth understanding of growing practices is imperative to being able to support growers who are implementing PSR requirements. Some applicants have found unique ways to meet the on-farm experience expectation and here are a few that could be considered:

- Volunteer to help on the farm for a day in return for a tour of the entire operation
- Volunteer on a university research station
- Attend university extension on-farm workshops and tours
- Offer to assist with writing a Farm Food Safety Plan
- Offer to assist with an On-Farm Readiness Review (OFRR) with the state department of agriculture
- Sign-up for a ‘working share’ CSA

**Expert tip:** Be familiar with each subpart of the PSR and be able to explain all the ‘musts’ to a grower audience before answering the PSA Lead Trainer application.
Remember that in order to gain on-farm experience, the grower will have to give you some of their time and access to their farm.

When on the farm, use the opportunity to gain an understanding of growing practices by asking “how” and “why” questions related to what you see on the farm. Ask questions about worker training, water sources, water distribution systems, soil amendments, wildlife, equipment sanitation, and buyer requirements. Use the experience to enrich PSA Grower Training delivery with practical examples. It may be valuable to think about ways that your skill set could help the grower as a way to return the favor. Offering to create a flyer for an upcoming farm event, using your PSR knowledge to answer some of their questions, or connecting them to new resources will go a long way toward showing your appreciation for the knowledge you have gained.

Occasionally, reviewers find applicants deficient in educational background as it relates to their understanding of food safety or fruit and vegetable production knowledge. This is usually easy to address by attending university extension training or other food safety or horticulture related course offerings. Courses such as ServSafe®, Pesticide Applicator, Certified Crop Advisor, HACCP (of any type), and FSMA Training (of any type) help an applicant build their credentials. A course does not need to be nationally recognized, but the applicant may be asked to explain how the course adds to their knowledge of food safety or growing practices.

In order to be as objective as possible, reviewers use a standardized rubric to score applications and ensure that applicants meet the minimum expectations of a PSA Lead Trainer. Multiple reviewers review each application to ensure the review process is fair and impartial. The goal is to make certain that PSA Grower Training Courses are effectively and consistently delivered to growers so that they are well informed and understand how to implement PSR requirements. Additional information on the requirements to become a PSA Lead Trainer and how applications are scored can be found on the PSA website.

**Expert tip:** Use the PSA Trainer Directory to find PSA Trainers in your area. Offer to co-train with them or assist with organizing a farm tour to help everyone better understand the PSR.

Are you looking for help gaining more experience or addressing a deficiency noted by the review committee?

Contact your PSA Regional Extension Associate or visit the PSA website for more information.