Tips for Developing a Successful PSA Lead Trainer Application

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The purpose of this fact sheet is to outline the submission criteria for submitting a Produce Safety Alliance (PSA) Lead Trainer Application and to share tips to help applicants develop a successful application. Having qualified lead trainers is critical to ensuring that each PSA Grower Training participant receives a quality experience that provides them with information they need to comply with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule (PSR) regulatory requirements.

PSA Lead Trainer applicants are evaluated on their educational background, on-farm experience, and their ability to demonstrate competency in the following four knowledge areas:

1. Produce safety scientific knowledge and experience
2. Fruit and vegetable production knowledge
3. Effective training delivery
4. Knowledge of the FSMA Produce Safety Rule

It is important for applicants to carefully consider these requirements and review their qualifications before they submit a PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application and pay the application fee.

In order to be as objective as possible, reviewers use a standardized rubric to score both the PSA Trainer Application and the PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application. Multiple reviewers are assigned to each application to ensure the evaluation process is fair and impartial. PSA Lead Trainer Applications are declined during the review process when there are deficiencies in foundational experience reported on the PSA Trainer Application and/or in responses given on the PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application. Additional information on the requirements to become a PSA Lead Trainer and how applications are scored are posted on the PSA website.

Applying to Become a PSA Lead Trainer:

1. Fill out the PSA Trainer Application
2. Attend the two-day PSA Train-the-Trainer Course
   • At this point you will be a PSA Trainer
3. Address any known deficiencies (described throughout this fact sheet)
4. Fill out the PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application
   • Be sure to indicate any education or experience gained since you filled out the PSA Trainer Application
PSA Trainer Application

Training Experience
The most common deficiency noted in the PSA Trainer Application is a lack of relevant training experience. Gaining additional experience by co-training with a PSA Lead Trainer at a PSA Grower Training is an ideal way to directly address deficiencies in training experience while also developing a deeper understanding of the curriculum. Co-training also encourages trainers to see things from the grower’s point of view. This helps trainers anticipate grower 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.

Knowledge of the FSMA PSR
Applications are often declined for failing to demonstrate knowledge of the PSR in responses to questions on the PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application. The PSR is relatively new to everyone, including those who have been teaching Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) for decades. Teaching this new material and answering questions during a training requires trainers to become intimately acquainted with the PSR, how it applies to farms, and the challenges the new requirements present to growers. Trainers often confuse audit requirements (e.g., USDA GAP & GHP, USDA Harmonized GAP, etc.) with PSR requirements, so it is also important to understand their differences.

On-Farm Experience
Another reason applicants are often 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 crucial to being able to support growers who are implementing PSR requirements. Some trainers have found unique ways to meet the on-farm experience expectation such as:

- Volunteering to help on a farm for a day in return for a tour of the entire operation
- Volunteering on a university research farm
- Attending university extension on-farm workshops and tours
- Assisting with writing a Farm Food Safety Plan
- Assisting the state department of agriculture with an On-Farm Readiness Review (OFRR)
- Signing-up for a ‘working share’ community-supported agriculture (CSA) program

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.
In order to gain relevant on-farm experience, the grower will need to grant access to their farm and spend time discussing their farm practices with the trainer (e.g., taking a hay ride from the parking lot to the apple orchard as a customer doesn’t satisfy this requirement). Trainers should use the opportunity to gain an understanding of growing practices by asking “how” and “why” questions related to what is observed while on the farm. Questions should be asked about worker training, water sources and use, water distribution systems, soil amendments, wildlife, equipment cleaning and sanitation, and buyer requirements. This experience will enrich PSA Grower Training delivery by giving the trainer practical examples. As a thank you to the grower for their time, trainers may consider offering to create a flyer for an upcoming farm event, using their PSR knowledge to answer some of the grower’s questions, or connecting the grower to new produce safety resources.

Occasionally, reviewers find an applicant 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 trainings or other food safety- or horticulture-related course offerings. Courses such as ServSafe®, Pesticide Applicator, Certified Crop Advisor, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) training 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.

**PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application**

The PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application includes questions to evaluate applicant competency in the four competency areas: Produce Safety Scientific Knowledge and Experience, Fruit and Vegetable Production Knowledge, Effective Training Delivery, and Knowledge of the PSR. Each of these is critical because PSA Lead Trainers bear significant responsibility in assuring that all participants in their PSA Grower Training Courses receive all the required information in the PSA Grower Training Curriculum, whether it is presented by them personally or by another PSA Trainer. The PSA Lead Trainer must also be able to understand grower questions and ensure that responses provided are accurate and relevant so that growers can comply with PSR requirements.
Keep Responses Relevant to Growers

Many of the questions asked on the PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application are questions growers have asked during PSA Grower Training Courses. A successful response demonstrates the applicant’s ability to communicate the related PSR requirements, along with GAPs that support the PSR requirements, in a way that a grower would understand. The applicant should demonstrate their ability to explain the content of the PSA Grower Training Course in their own words (i.e., not copy and paste text from the PSA Grower Training Manual). This may include breaking information down into understandable parts, relating concepts to the overall goal of on-farm food safety, making judgements based on standards and available guidance, and citing the appropriate regulatory provisions. The following recommendations will help an applicant write responses that meet rubric criteria and reduce the likelihood that follow-up will be required to assess an applicant’s readiness to become a PSA Lead Trainer.

- **Answer the questions as if you were responding to a grower.** The PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application is a test of the trainer’s abilities, including both communication skills and knowledge in all four competency areas.

- **Become familiar with each subpart of the PSR so you are prepared to explain all the ‘musts’ to a grower.** Applicants are encouraged to reference the PSR while filling out the supplemental application, especially when the question is directly related to PSR requirements.

- **Remember that incorrect ‘recommendations’ can be costly for the grower.** Common mistakes include stating that a Good Agricultural Practice (i.e., a should) is a PSR requirement (i.e., a must), expecting the farm to comply with the requirements of another FSMA rule (e.g., Preventive Controls Rule for Human Food when their operation is not subject to this rule), or suggesting impractical methods to reduce risk.

- **Do not copy and paste or plagiarize.** You may cite other resources, but be sure to draft your response in your own words. It is important to go beyond what the PSA Grower Training Manual says in order to demonstrate your ability to explain the content to course participants.

Each application is evaluated by a committee of produce safety experts. The response to each question on the PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application receives a score of 1, 2, or 3:

1. **Below expectations.** The candidate explains concepts incorrectly. Application will be declined.

2. **Needs further evaluation.** The candidate seems to understand basic principles, but cannot explain or apply the information. Follow-up required.

3. **Meets expectations.** The candidate demonstrates the ability to present and explain the content. This may include breaking the information down into parts, relating the parts to the overall picture, and making judgements based on standards.

**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
Stay Up-to-Date

PSA Lead Trainers are expected to stay up-to-date with FDA announcements and guidance. Failure to do so could result in an application being declined as applicants are expected to know the most up-to-date information. As new information is released, it may change answers to some of the questions, so it is very important that applicants read and become familiar with this information. This can be done by visiting the FDA webpage on the PSR and by signing up for FDA email updates. This is a good practice since it is imperative the PSA Trainers stay current with any changes affecting PSR compliance. The PSA Trainer Updates webpage is another resource that can help you stay current with the latest announcements. The PSA shares updates through the PSA Trainer and Lead Trainer listserv and offers regular Produce Safety Educator Calls to further facilitate information exchange.

Other Tips

As you fill out the PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application, please keep these additional tips in mind:

- **Read the instructions carefully.**
  - Please read the question carefully and provide appropriate scientific references or professional observations to support your answer.
  - Think about the question in the context of the competency area being evaluated. The reviewers will use your response to evaluate your ability in that competency area.
  - When in doubt, give responses with examples of how the information can be applied on a farm or by a farmer rather than general or generic information.
  - Responses may not be any longer than 350 words per question. Responses which are longer than 350 words may be declined without review by the committee.

- **Consider working offline to save your work, since you cannot save your progress in the application.**
  - The application form does not have a save draft feature, so once you start the form you must finish. You will lose your work if you close your browser before submitting.
  - Working offline and saving your answers in a document (e.g., a Word document) prior to opening the form will allow you to paste your answers into the form in a streamlined manner.

- **Proofread all responses.** Ensure your responses are accurate and understandable, that they address the questions (and all parts of the questions) and that they demonstrate that you can convey the PSR requirements to growers.

- If you need to navigate to a previous page, do not use the back button on the internet browser. Instead, use the back arrow within the form itself.

**Expert tip:** If English is not your preferred language, consider working with a trusted translator to make sure you understand the English-language questions.

- Write the response in your preferred language and have it translated to English.
- Check to make sure you agree with the translated response before submitting your application.
Final Steps in the Application Process

▪ After submitting the PSA Lead Trainer Supplemental Application, you will be directed to a payment screen.
  • The cost is $325 for non-profit organizations and $500 for for-profit organizations. This fee covers the cost of the PSA Lead Trainer Review Committee members’ time reviewing and approving applications, as well as any time spent conducting follow-up interviews with applicants.
  • If you inadvertently submit your responses or experience technological issues during the application process, please contact us immediately at psatrainers@cornell.edu and we will help you reset the form. We will not make changes after reviewers have been assigned to your application.
  ▪ You will receive a confirmation e-mail from psatrainers@cornell.edu when the application has been received. Please check your ‘junk’ or ‘spam’ folder as occasionally e-mail clients will filter the address into the wrong folder. This is also important to keep in mind while you wait for the committee’s decision. If they require clarification or wish to set up an interview, that request will arrive via email.
  ▪ Review of applications occurs on a first-come, first-served basis. The PSA cannot provide an estimated timeline for when your application will be reviewed.
    • Do not make arrangements to serve as a PSA Lead Trainer for a PSA Grower Training Course until you have been approved as a PSA Lead Trainer.

We appreciate your interest in becoming a PSA Lead Trainer and the time you have devoted to produce safety outreach. It is critically important to have PSA Lead Trainers located throughout the U.S. and globally so that courses are available for growers who want and need to attend a PSA Grower Training. Thank you for working with us to achieve this goal.

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.