An interview with Debbie Crosby

Interview by Debbie Read

Ms. Debbie Crosby is the Chief Quality Officer for the H. J. Heinz Co. In this role she is responsible for global strategic direction of quality and food safety systems; scientific policies and issue management; and global food safety regulation.

Prior to this assignment she was the Director of Quality Assurance & Scientific Affairs at Heinz World Headquarters. In 2002-2003 she also served as Interim Technical Director for Heinz Europe and the acting head of Quality Assurance for Heinz North America – Consumer Products Company in 2003-2004.

Before moving to world headquarters in 1998, she held various roles at the Heinz Frozen Foods (Ore-Ida) affiliate in Quality Assurance for twenty years. At Ore-Ida her chief responsibilities covered food safety, sanitation, HACCP system development and quality audits.

Ms. Crosby received a B.S. in microbiology from Oregon State University in 1977. She is a Certified Quality Auditor from the American Society for Quality. She is a member of the Institute of Food Technologists, American Society for Microbiology, the International Association for Food Protection and the American Society for Quality. Ms. Crosby also serves on the President’s Leadership Committee of the Annapolis Centre and the Building & Grounds Committee for the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank.

Firstly, a very warm welcome to you. You have been with Heinz for many years now. How does your current role as Chief Quality Officer differ from your previous roles within the company?

Debbie Crosby:

Many of my other roles were “hands on” and real time. Now I am all about strategy and global alignment.

You recently attended the official opening of the Heinz Innovation and Quality Centre. Can you tell us a bit more about the Centre and what Heinz hopes to achieve from such a venture, both from a consumer and corporate point of view?

Debbie Crosby:

The Heinz Innovation and Quality Centre is a global centre of excellence for ketchup, condiments and sauces and is a centralized knowledge base for our North American quality activities and NPD. We have a strong and talented technical team based there and true state-of-the-art laboratories. Plus, we also have there facilities for sensory evaluation, focus groups and a pilot plant capable of supporting product and process development in ketchup, sauces, frozen and chilled foods. It is an impressive operation!

In his interview with Management First, Stanley Marash, the Chairman and CEO of STAT-A-MATRIX, states that 90-95 per cent of quality programme failures are due to deficiencies in the system, which is management’s responsibility, rather than in the people. Through your involvement in the Heinz global quality programme, how far would you agree with this?

Debbie Crosby:

Absolutely! You must have a well developed risk assessment process, a systematic method for preventing or managing these risks, a robust training process, measurement & tracking processes, and a communication plan that touches all levels of the organization – in other words a thoroughly developed quality system. The people that implement all of these want to do the right things to protect product quality and safety and to delight our customers. When a component of the quality system is weak or ill defined then even the most well-intended effort by employees may not be able to prevent the failures.
What more can you tell us about the Heinz global quality programme?

Debbie Crosby:

Heinz has a long history of quality that dates back to our founder putting horseradish in a clear jar so that consumers could see that it had not been adulterated. Over the years, quality has continued to evolve within Heinz to the model we are using today of Quality Assurance Risk Assessment. Our systems process is built on standard quality principles such as ISO9001 and Six Sigma, with a healthy dose of food safety through the addition of HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) process. On paper it is a bit daunting, covering 18 system control elements (such as strategic plans, risk assessment, training, etc) and 25 operational control elements (such as water quality, Good Manufacturing Practices, foreign material control, etc). Each global business unit site is measured against these elements and develops a risk matrix that allows them to plan improvement activities targeted at the highest risk areas. The process recognizes that some locations are at very different stages of quality evolution and allows them to plan improvement activities targeted at the highest risk areas. The process builds on strengths within Heinz and allows for differences in regulations between product types and regions.

"Over the years, quality has continued to evolve within Heinz to the model we are using today of Quality Assurance Risk Assessment."

General issues and concerns are discussed at Global Quality Assurance Council meetings, which I chair. Our meetings occur every 4-6 weeks and are held via conference call. We have representatives from all regions and all major business units.

Annually we meet at a Global Quality Conference, where we also interact closely with our chief business partners in the Global Supply Chain, Continuous Improvement Teams, Regulatory Affairs Groups and Communications Teams. On a monthly basis, our regional QA teams work with regional representatives to manage real-time opportunities and issues.

It has been estimated that up to 60 per cent of TQM processes fail. Why do you think there is such a high failure rate?

Debbie Crosby:

It may have been due to poor execution of TQM. In many cases, TQM was targeted broadly at the entire organization, every person, every department, everyone. That broad sweep did not allow for practices to become imbedded within the organization. It became a “flavour of the day” programme rather than a transformative process. I believe it would have been better to have started smaller and gain local support through successes that addressed real problems in the language of that part of the business. This is how we are achieving a real foot hold with Six Sigma. We started in a single business unit. It is growing as a “grass roots” effort. There is upper management support and commitment, but Six Sigma will not be driven across large segments of even this business until the process shows success. Projects are practical and pragmatic. Six Sigma is solving real issues once and for all.

There have been many seminal dates in Heinz’ history, such as 1918 when Heinz became the very first company to employ scientific controls and laboratory testing. Where do you see Heinz in 10 years’ time?

Debbie Crosby:

When I started with Ore-Ida Foods in 1977, Heinz was made up of affiliated companies that really worked independently. There was little communication or sharing of learning between even the technical or quality groups. Now, we are really working together. We are sharing best practices, developing common systems and approaches to prevent risks and really putting the focus on our consumers and customers. In 10 years, I believe that we will be even more engaged with our consumers and customers and more closely aligned with our partners in the supply chain, both internal and external. That alignment will come in the form of a common philosophy around quality, and an understanding on how our businesses are inextricably linked.

William R. Johnson took the helm as President in 1996, CEO in 1998 and Chairman in 2000. How would you say his leadership style differs from that of former CEO Anthony J F. O’Reilly?

Debbie Crosby:

Both Tony O’Reilly and Bill Johnson are strong leaders with clear visions and great communication skills. Bill’s approach is much like that of a coach, always urging his team to
win. He’s a very strong supporter of our quality programs and insistent upon high performance.

**What do you see as the major challenges for the future in the field of quality?**

Debbie Crosby:

Most of what I see are directly related to the food industry. As we move products more and more around the world we will need to harmonize some of the regulations that governments apply to food products, for instance in the US we label and control a set of 8 allergens, in Japan it is 20, in the UK 12. Regulations around pesticide usage, heavy metals and additives add even more complexity. The ways that we communicate to consumers things like nutritional composition and ingredients all add to the complexity and costs of a global food supply.

**On a much lighter note, what is your favourite Heinz product?**

Debbie Crosby:

Tomato ketchup, of course! It really goes great on Ore-Ida potatoes, too!!