



Team Cleaning Addresses Key Industry Issues by Jim Harris, Sr.

If there are two sides to every story, the key vantage points in the labor-intensive cleaning industry are those of employer and employee. Though sometimes viewed as an adversarial relationship, it is more constructive to recognize the different perspectives from which the two groups approach a single business issue. This is vital since more than 90 percent of the average cleaning budget is spent on labor, thus both employer and employee must understand the other's needs and the impact that a cleaning system (or the lack of one) has on this mutually-dependent partnership--and on the customer.

"Increased productivity," for example, may suggest to cleaning business operators and owners accomplishing more, faster, and better without increasing staff or the overall budget. Conversely, for those on the receiving end of the pay stub, the term may conjure up a negative scenario of lofty performance expectations despite inadequate training, insufficient supplies, and an impossible workload--all at the same relatively low pay.

The good news is that although the two groups may approach certain issues from opposite ends of the business spectrum, smart companies and their employees understand the symbiotic nature of the relationship and are relieved to find solutions that meet industry challenges from both ends. Team cleaning is such a solution.

Team cleaning is a specialized approach to cleaning. Although the principles of team specialization can be applied to a "team" as small as one, the "classic" team consists of four specialists who use specific tools to perform separate, clearly defined duties--"starter" tasks (dusting, emptying trash, etc.), "closer" tasks (vacuuming, inspecting the starter's work, turning off lights, etc.), restroom, and utility (scrubbing floors, etc.). Together, they form a cohesive unit that cleans faster, more efficiently, with fewer products, and less supervision--or in 21st century management lingo, a team that "does more, better, with less."



Costs, Demand and Delivery

In the cleaning industry, doing more (work) to provide better (service) with less (money and resources) is more than a cliché; it is a business necessity. According to American School & University's most recent annual surveys (2002 and 2003), on average, cleaning budgets of U.S. school districts have been slashed 25 percent to 30 percent in the past 10 to 15 years, with 2003's budget marking the lowest (as a percent of total) in 32 years. Meanwhile, the typical school custodian's responsibilities continue to increase-to an average of 25,000 square feet of space per employee per shift in 2000. Many school facility professionals say their workloads have more than doubled during the years 2000-2003.

Studies show similar budget-to-workload imbalances in other segments of the cleaning industry.

Meanwhile, the demand for outsourced cleaning services continues to

climb, in large part because outsourcing is often perceived to provide higher productivity and a better ratio of performance to price than insourcing. The Freedonia Group, a leading industry market research firm, predicts demand for building service contractors (BSCs) alone will grow to US \$50 billion annually by 2007 and \$90 billion by 2010.

Even contract cleaning companies, however, are in trouble. They may lose up to 50 percent or more of contracts annually due to service quality and delivery issues according to industry surveys.

In addition, both in-house and outsourced operations face serious labor turnover challenges with employee turnover rates of 200 to 300 percent all too common.

Finding & Keeping Workers

The cleaning industry employed nearly 4.3 million workers in 2002 according to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL).

According to the DOL: "Limited training requirements, low pay, and numerous part-time and temporary jobs contribute to the need to replace workers who leave this very large occupation each year."



Language differences, illiteracy and limited education levels further complicate the situation while the hefty costs of replacing entry-level staff-anywhere from \$5,000 to \$7,000 per employee-put intense budget and performance pressure on both in-house and contracted operations.

Thus, many in-house cleaning operations and contract cleaning companies are striving (some desperately) to find ways to reduce cleaning costs and turnover, and increase productivity without sacrificing service--which explains their growing interest in team cleaning.

Systematic Savings and High Performance, Happier Workers

Team cleaning's assembly-line approach enables performing more cleaning in less time, freeing up workers to accomplish additional tasks, and improving the quantity and quality of cleaning.

Team cleaning empowers workers with clear performance expectations and easy-to-learn techniques for meeting goals. It provides an opportunity for each worker to focus and develop greater expertise, which fuels even more efficiency. Team cleaning requires less supervision since workloads are precisely and fairly scheduled based on cleanable square footage. Team sizes are manageable, and workers are held--and hold each other--accountable for their time and performance.

It can also significantly reduce supply expense by eliminating product and equipment redundancy rampant in other cleaning methods while lowering overhead costs, such as electric, heat, storage space-even water bills--through reduced usage.

While wages play a role in employee retention, proper training, a sense of job pride, and a feeling of community can raise employee retention rates more significantly than compensation as many team cleaning success stories published in various trade magazines demonstrate.

If that isn't enough, team cleaning also improves safety.



Health & Safety

With the National Center for Infectious Disease (NCID) reporting that the average American gets sick 15 days a year--totaling more than 4.2 billion sick days in 2001--concerns over the negative effects of poorly maintained indoor environments have never loomed larger. Highly respected organizations, such as the American Lung Association, are teaming up with equipment manufacturing, government, and other concerned organizations to combat dangerous increases in respiratory ailments aggravated--if not created by--poor indoor air quality. Officials are investigating the likely spread of SARS and other potentially lethal diseases through negligent public facility hygiene. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports 2 million people in the United States contract nosocomial infections (those caught in hospitals) annually while sources estimate perhaps 100,000 of these patients' infections are linked to substandard sanitation practices.

Sharing the health and safety spotlight are growing concerns about the health and environmental repercussions of the often toxic chemicals used to clean and disinfect surfaces, an especially worrisome area when one considers the "five billion pounds of chemicals per year" used in the institutional cleaning market according to Steve Ashkin, president of the "green cleaning" consulting firm, The Ashkin Group.

Then, there is the entire U.S. healthcare debacle. For some smaller contractors--and even larger firms--the only alternatives to skyrocketing insurance premiums and hefty legal claims is to declare bankruptcy or leave workers uncovered--a risky proposition considering the U.S. Department of Labor classifies cleaning personnel as the fifth most likely workers to be injured on the job. According to the department's Bureau of Labor Statistics, 127 janitors actually died from 1993-2001 as a direct result of the cleaning products they were using, a figure many experts claim is sadly underreported--and rising.

Ergonomics and occupational health expert Christine Aickin of Christine Aickin and Associates is not surprised by these statistics.

"Cleaners sustain a high frequency of back, shoulder, neck, arm, and hand injuries," she says. "The injury/disease incidence rate for full-time workers is nearly three times the incidence of other industries. This is likely because cleaning work is physically demanding, and equipment often has poor ergonomics."



In addition, notes Aickin, not all the health problems facing cleaning workers are physical. "There are...many psychological stress factors which have an impact on cleaners," she says. "These include role conflicts, difficult human relationships, supervision deficiencies, time pressure, fear of making mistakes, lack of control over the work, limited career advancement possibilities, lack of positive feedback on work, and threat of unemployment in economic downturns. Cleaning is also at the lowest level of the occupational hierarchy, which creates further strain."

Team cleaning confronts these health and safety issues.

Featuring well-trained specialists, team cleaning produces better cleaning while reducing injuries and illnesses caused by misinformation and the misuse of equipment and potentially toxic chemicals. The use of specialized products (e.g., the restroom specialist's flat mop is used only in restrooms) lowers the chance of equipment cross-contamination, believed to be a major culprit in the spread of germs and some infectious diseases. More ergonomic equipment--flat mops versus heavy string mops, backpacks versus bulkier uprights, for example--promotes more thorough cleaning of hard-to-reach and/or maneuver areas, such as tight corners, around furniture, etc., while reducing workers' discomfort and risk of injury. Cross-training, a standard practice of team cleaning, helps increase safety by preparing workers to perform duties outside their regular purview.

By relying on a prescribed set of easy-to-master techniques that enable workers to reach clear, achievable goals, team cleaning creates job proficiency and eliminates the confusion, stress, and other problems that stem from ambiguous, unrealistic, and misunderstood expectations. In turn, reaching goals promotes a sense of professionalism, increases self-esteem, and improves overall employee performance and morale. The team concept also encourages a sense of camaraderie while cross-training makes workers more capable and confident about accepting additional or alternative duties. Of course, as in any job, proficient, productive, and willing workers are far more likely to be trusted with new responsibilities and receive higher compensation.

Certainly many of the advantages covered thus far--such as improved service, easier, comprehensive training, and improved health and safety--are as relevant to employees as to employers.



Team cleaning creates a more satisfying job environment that encourages experienced workers to stay, which, in turn, makes the employee-employer bridge stronger and increasingly stable from both ends.