

Team Cleaning: Reorganizing Custodial Work

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Abstract

Custodial work is a process with clearly defined, actionable, and measurable tasks. Therefore, it requires a thoughtful design to maximize quality and minimize cost. Thus, a good cleaning program is first created on paper, pilot-tested to ensure that it is devoid of inefficient tools and equipment (Frank, 1999). The result of a good cleaning program is that cleaning specialists do not perform redundant tasks nor expend unnecessary energy, and organizations achieve higher cleaning quality while minimizing cleaning costs.

Introduction

According to Barry Moore (1997), cleanliness has a direct impact on the physical and psychological health of individuals. He noted that cleaner environments create more favorable experiences for customers and increase workers' productivity.

Cleanliness is the responsibility of every organizational member, from the managing director to the cleaner (Ho, 1997). Ho stated that this is why, in Japan, they do not need street cleaners in residential areas because families are responsible for cleaning the pavement in front of their houses. Hence, all they need are rubbish collectors. This principle is also applicable to organizations. For example, organizations that require mechanics and operators to clean their work areas use fewer custodial services.

Cleaning systems

There are two basic types of cleaning systems: zone cleaning and team cleaning (Walker, 2002). Walker noted that zone cleaning often relies on one individual to perform all tasks for a specific floor or area of a building. He also stated that zone cleaning seldom provides specific managerial directions to the custodial staff. It, therefore, allows workers to set the pace and quality of cleanup. Thus, some have argued that zone cleaning leads to employee "ownership" of the assigned area (Aguiar, 2001; Hanson, 2006; Patterson, 2003).

Team cleaning, on the other hand, relies on multiple individuals to go through an area or building in a systematic fashion, performing specific (predetermined) tasks. Team cleaning is generally segregated into the following duties (Harris, 2005):

1. Light duty specialist, which involves dusting, emptying trash, and spot cleaning

2. Vacuum specialist, which consists of vacuuming carpets and hardwood floors
3. Restroom specialist, which requires cleaning, sanitizing, and restocking supplies in the restroom
4. Utility specialist, which involves cleaning lobby areas, spot cleaning glass, mopping and scrubbing hardwood floors, and hauling trash to a dumpster from central collection points.

Additionally, Harris indicated that, within the team cleaning concept, each specialist performs their duties autonomously; and, each "classical" team has four members performing one of the above responsibilities. Cleaning teams can include seven members, and as few as one depending on the size of the area or building.

Team cleaning is said to be more efficient (Walker, 2002). Additionally, it requires less equipment than zone cleaning. With zone cleaning, each zone often requires a full complement of cleaning equipment. According to Walker, the purpose of team cleaning is to do more with less labor, less waste, fewer complaints, and less money, while obtaining a higher quality appearance with less effort. Thus, some researchers believe that team cleaning enhances the safety and health of employees and reduces short-term training requirements since custodians do not have to be trained in all areas (Campbell, 2004). Nonetheless, cross-training by rotating specialists' duties is organizationally advantageous (Rathey, 2005).

The literature indicates that team cleaning is more effective. However, management should carefully examine cleaning requirements and cleaning space configuration to ascertain which method is best (Hanson, 2006). For instance, from understanding the cleaning requirements and cleanable space configuration, management should know how long it would take each specialist to complete a task. Therefore, regardless of the type of cleaning system used (zone or team), some method of tracking personnel and cleaning tasks should be available (Walker, 2002). Walker suggested using job cards to tell each specialist where he or she should be working, time in the area, and performance task(s). The job card method allows for documentation and fine-tuning deviations in expected performance.

Equipment

Team cleaning introduces a new approach to cleaning as well as better equipment. It introduces replicable work procedures, ergonomically friendly equipment, and improved handling of cleaning solutions. As a result, some researchers believe that team cleaning tends to reduce injuries and improve safety (Campbell, 2004).

The new tools are backpacks, high-flow carpet extractors, microfiber mop or no-touch cleaning equipment, as well as pre-packed cleaning solutions. Pre-packed cleaning solutions limit employee exposure to chemicals and are color-coded for easy identification; they are also biodegradable with low volatile organic contaminants.

Technological improvements, such as the backpack vacuums, enhance cleaning efficiency by allowing tasks to be completed in shorter periods. Some backpack vacuums, however, are noisy and awkward. Organizations should pay attention to the decibels generated by the vacuum as well as the weight of the backpack. Spencer (2004) noted that the general office noise level is between 64-68 decibels. Therefore, use a backpack vacuum with a similar or lower decibel range. Campbell (2001) highlighted the Pro Team as producing a lightweight vacuum and PortionPac as a packaging company specializing in disposable chemical packets.

It is, however, essential to involve employees in the process of determining cleaning tasks, optimal cleaning processes, and the acquisition of new equipment, as well as in the decision to standardize on the selected tools, processes, and work patterns. Moreover, staff and managers should monitor and document the performance of newly introduced methods, and equipment, so timely and appropriate adjustments may occur.

Defining the tasks

It is not prudent to expect overnight success with team cleaning. However, clearly defining the specialist tasks will contribute to the initiative's success. Walker (1997) indicated that often managers who use team cleaning create color-coded cards for each specialty. The cards list each task and the time required to complete the job.

The specialist work card is a step-by-step procedure of a standardized, repeatable, and traceable pattern. It is the result of staff and management jointly identifying optimal steps and equipment necessary to clean the area. It focuses on eliminating wasted motion, introducing time savings tools, and minimizing job steps and route decisions. The measures incorporate consistent, reliable, and sanitary cleaning standards. Clearly defined actionable cleaning tasks, and measurable are critical components of an effective performance measurement system (Cable & Davis, 2004).

Standardization

Moore (1997) indicated that team cleaning leads to standardization of training, cleaning products, equipment, and methods. Standardization can lead to improved compliance and lower transactional costs; it enables predictable and repeatable results. However, standardization of cleaning procedures can only succeed when it is appropriately used. One way to measure standardization success is by using a balanced scorecard to define measurable characteristics associated with the success or failure of the team cleaning process.

Transitioning to team cleaning

Transitioning from zone to team cleaning requires careful evaluation and planning. Often the best transitional approach is to inform custodians of the organization's intention to implement the process. Thoroughly brief them on the mechanics of the process and the expected outcome; solicit their ideas as to how best to implement the process, the best area for piloting the test, and perceived advantages and disadvantages, train supervisors and custodians; and implement, monitor, and refine the process (Meyers, 2003).

Troy University implemented a team cleaning process gradually with no adverse consequences; they believed that their efforts to work closely with staff and administrators helped smooth over rough spots (Rathey, 2005). Critics of team cleaning, however, have claimed that team cleaning is cruel, dehumanizing, and degrading to custodians (Patterson, 2003). Moreover, some have compared team cleaning to Taylorism with a regimented system of work organization and managerial practices (Aguiar, 2001). Aguiar believes that the reorganization of custodial work entails work intensification and chaos for custodians; moreover, it has led to layoffs, redundancies, health and safety issues, and, most of all, stress to employees and their families.

Aguiar (2001) noted that employees resist supervisors who insist that they follow closely the steps set for them in the instruction of production processes. An essential element in the transition process is building consensus, as well as including staff in the development stage.

According to Campbell (2004), at Boeing, commitment from the custodial staff was initially hard to achieve. He noted that custodians viewed the program with disdain; they did not like the backpack, complained that they needed more chemicals to clean, and felt that team cleaning was not sufficient. Over time, however, custodial commitment levels at Boeing increased as well as satisfaction with the new ergonomic tools. Perhaps, the severe downsizing in custodial staff from 900 to 302, after September 11, influenced the initial adverse reaction towards the innovation.

Sandia National Laboratories, a government facility in New Mexico, determined that to succeed in team cleaning, everyone should accept the concept. Therefore, they made sure that managers and supervisors understood the idea by attending Janitor University (Campbell, 2004). Campbell noted that during implementation, Sandia made employee health and wellness a significant priority. For instance, time was set aside on custodians' job cards for stretching, and custodians were encouraged to report any work-related injury. With the wellness program and team cleaning, Sandia improved morale and the health of employees. Thus, the success of Sandia's team cleaning may be due to perceived organizational support. That is, custodians may have felt that the organization was looking out for their best interest and reciprocated in kind.

Communication protocols

Team cleaning members, although integral to the team, perform their duties autonomously. That is, they often enter workspaces at different times. Therefore, it is essential to establish a communication protocol between them. For instance, for office cleaning, the light-duty specialist (LDS) is the starter, and the vacuum specialist (VS) is closer. Thus, if LDS goes into a conference room to perform his or her duties and recognizes that the floor is clean, closes the door to indicate to the VS that vacuuming may be omitted. Likewise, the VS should carry a notepad to document and communicate any enhancements that may help the starter.

Measuring performance

Management should use the itemized checklist, the job cards, to evaluate work. Moreover, they should communicate to the staff that the itemized list will be used to measure cleaning progress (Walker, 1997).

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