

Beyond Broom Pushing

By Thomas J. Dykiel

Years ago, custodians were individuals who were good with their hands in repairing just about anything that broke, in addition to emptying trash, mopping floors and cutting the grass.

With the creation of the skilled union labor force, the custodian who made necessary repairs to facilities was less common due to labor contract agreements. Things that were previously repaired by the custodian now became the contracted responsibility of carpenters, laborers, electricians and pipe fitters.

Similarly in today's marketplace, the custodian is no longer just responsible for emptying trash and mopping floors -- they have acquired various skills that make them skilled workers. They can have responsibility for multi-million dollar facilities and have knowledge in computers, payroll, personnel, budgets, energy, facility management, repair work and, of course, cleaning.

COMPUTER KNOWLEDGE

With new technology, custodians are responsible for controlling heating, ventilation and air conditioning for their facilities through the use of energy computers. Computer training can require five to 10 days of intensive training on the operation of the computer and the equipment.

For the custodians of the School City of Hammond, IN, computer training for the HVAC system included instruction on increasing and decreasing temperature in rooms for daytime or nighttime activities, turning fans on to draw inside or outside air, and the actual operation and cleaning of the equipment and preventive maintenance, which includes replacing filters and oiling motors, among other procedures. The training stressed that proper ventilation is essential in adequately regulating indoor air quality.

Administrative duties are also handled through computer programs. Hammond administration requires their custodians to input their payroll directly into the computer on a daily basis and then transmit it to payroll personnel, with a copy going to the custodial office for final review. Again, the custodians attended an eight-hour course on the operations of the computer and the software.

All of the work orders for repairs to the facilities are computerized. The custodian inputs the work order directly into the computer and sends it to the maintenance department, to be directed toward the department that is responsible for the repair.

Computer training for this function consisted of three hours of training for each custodian on how to access the system, input the work order, make necessary corrections and transmit the work order to the maintenance department.

Even determining the annual custodial department budget is related to computer use.

INCREASED INFLUENCE

A committee of Hammond custodians has the responsibility of evaluating cleaning equipment and supplies. For instance, the Hammond school district purchases a case of cleaning supplies to be evaluated and distributes them to the committee members to be used. The committee members then prepare a written evaluation of the products and submit it to the operations administrator for review.

When the purchasing department is ready to extend the bid for cleaning supplies, they meet with the operations

administrator to finalize the supply list. In this meeting, the final supply list depends heavily on the report of the custodial committee evaluation team.

Custodians are also held responsible for their monthly and yearly budgets. In the monthly custodian meeting, a detailed school-wide financial budget is given to the custodians that includes every school expenditure (excluding food service) from salaries, substitute teacher and custodial costs to equipment costs.

In these budgets the custodians know exactly what the school's monthly expenditures are, and they can keep track of their own budgets to control costs. In November, facilities administration requires a budget projection report from each custodial department to help determine their next calendar year budget.

Increased authority also carries increased responsibility. A custodian who is not familiar with their building could cause additional damage to a facility during times of emergency.

For example, during a time of cold weather, a sprinkler head in the principal's office at one of Hammond's elementary schools was dripping during the night. While cleaning the office, the custodian on duty noticed the drip and placed a bucket under it. That evening the sprinkler turned on and saturated everything in the office and left nearly 2 inches of water in the principal's office, main office, nurse's office and hallway. The custodians on duty were unable to stop the flow of water because they didn't know the location of the water cutoff valves.

After this incident, facilities administration provided a floor plan of each facility, identifying all emergency water, electrical and gas cutoffs, and made it available to all custodians. To avoid this future situation, custodial staff now periodically review the function and location of each emergency cutoff. Mounted stickers on the cutoff valves also describe this information.

"QUASI-MANAGEMENT"

In some organizations, head custodians are looked upon as being "quasi-management." They are responsible for the operation of the building, payroll and personnel. When grievances are filed by a staff custodian, they are usually directed at the head custodian regarding overtime, job description, among other issues.

Though the head and staff custodian pay union dues, the union will almost always take the side of the staff custodian against the head custodian. Union representatives may assume that the head custodian's opinion on a grievance issue would represent management's view and would not even consider speaking with the head custodian (though the head custodian also belongs to the same union).

Custodians must have excellent people skills due to the fact that, on any given day, they come in contact with administrators, teachers, students and the general public. Custodians must be properly trained in "people skills" because they meet such a variety of people.

At the Hammond schools there is an in-house training course for head custodians regarding personnel management. Staff and head custodians have attended seminars on conflict resolution, total quality management, supervising skills, progressive discipline and team building.

Also, videotapes on these topics, among other personnel issues, are reviewed during monthly custodian meetings. Training staff and head custodians in "people skills" also helps them resolve various personnel concerns on their own that they handle on a daily basis.

The role of the custodian has changed dramatically in the past 20 to 40 years. No longer is the custodian required to just clean as an unskilled worker. Previously, a custodian was promoted on the basis of their ability to clean. Now, issues of leadership, "people skills," computer knowledge and ability to clean are all looked at in

the promotion decision.

So the next time you see a custodian, don't think of them as an unskilled worker who simply mops, waxes and empties garbage. Think of them as skilled professionals who control the environment that we live and work in.

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