

Motivating Housekeeping and Maintenance People

By Joel Levitt

Even more than with regular maintenance, people is 75 percent of housekeeping problem, not chemistry, not machines. Usually, the housekeeping people are not highly paid, they are generally at the low end of the spectrum. In some places the pool of talent is not great; it could be this is the people's second job. Sometimes in the evenings there are problems with fatigue, with motivation. There are some highly motivated custodial people, but many are working other jobs and only take these jobs to make ends meet. The biggest challenge, because this is basically a people problem business, is motivating these people to a relatively good job when they're not being watched. They need to change the water in their mopping buckets, or take care of their machines to make the right dilutions, to care about what the results look like, things like that.



Everyday Strategies Used to Motivate -these strategies were chosen from interviews with 500 maintenance and housekeeping professionals. These ideas are not theory (even though they follow current theories quite well) but rather reports from the supervision trenches.

Recognition

The easiest thing out of the list of recommended items for motivation (see below) is in the area of Recognition. Work on ways to recognize the custodial staff, and not trivializing it. One of the ways that won't work is the "Employee of the Month" situation. "Employee of the Month" only covers employees who are visible to the people making the choices, and it becomes a political thing rather than an actual thing. A much better way to do it than that is to make a different employee "Employee of the Month" and do it alphabetically. Alphabetically make someone give them a special parking space, give them a gift certificate for a dinner, put a plaque up on the wall, and then go through your entire crew and make them employee of the month for one month, and then start over again. You'll have more good results from that than from any "Employee of the Month" where you choose somebody and then the same people get it and then there's the problems of the people that are working at their aptitude level and they're doing as good a job as they can, they're working their butt off, but they're not in those kind of jobs where they would get the recognition.

Treat the Workers Like People

Get to know them personally, listen to them and keep your mouth shut, remember their birthdays, praise them. If there's a death in the family, maybe you can raise money for plane fares and expenses. Invite people to share Thanksgiving, maybe have a barbeque for the whole shop once a year. All this is being courteous, doing that little one percent extra for these people and giving them that little bit of good treatment.

Training and Ongoing Development

Training and ongoing development is something that people look for. Do you have some training going on in you facility or department, whether it's new machinery, new chemicals, host industries, or whatever, about the industry, about what goes on? Are you actively training or are you making the assumption that a janitor doesn't need to know anything that you're hiring somebody from the neck down? Is that the assumption that you're making?

Give the Crew Real Power

It would be a good situation if you are able to give the custodial crew real power in choosing things, particularly in the area of chemicals where the chemical meets the specifications that the department has set up. If it meets the specifications, you might find some more "buy-in" if people get to choose equipment, or chemicals, or participate in the crew or the team that chooses the new floor machine. Let them try different ones and then come up with what they think is the best.

Ownership

Ownership is a key concept; someone who owns something will treat it better. The worker as owner has a say in new equipment, supplies, and techniques.

Planning

Many people enjoy working in a planned environment. A planned environment has fewer surprises, a more even workflow, and higher productivity. This will appeal to the motivated employee.

Use Their Ideas

Frequently, the best ideas come from the people closest to the action. Skilled maintenance workers have significant experience that, once unleashed, can solve major and minor problems.

Communication

When people understand each other, they are more likely to work together with higher morale. High morale translates into smoother functioning with open channels of communication.

In one example, a maintenance supervisor needed to improve communications between shifts. He set up inter-shift meetings to discuss all the issues affecting the workers. After a few meetings, workers began sharing information from their shifts. As a result of those meetings, when workers were finished their shifts, they would stay over a few minutes to bring the next person up to date.

Interventions Used to Motivate Housekeeping People

One method to motivate housekeeping people is to let the people see the reality of the boss as a person, as one of them.

Another method is to use “challenge and competition.” An example of this would be, “I bet you can’t clean the new wing by Friday,” or setting up a competition between groups.

In one facility, the maintenance manager set up a challenge where each person was given an area of responsibility. They developed a “Trouble Failure” report that indicated the amount and reason for downtime. Each area competed for the lowest downtime statistics. People took an active interest in their areas after the competition began.

Drama can be used effectively. In one plant, an engineer called a plant meeting and explained they were losing \$45,000 worth of product each month. He opened a case and dramatically dumped 45,000 one-dollar bills into a garbage can while saying, “This is what we are doing with our product.” He received the desired reaction. Waste dropped 50% the next month and continued to improve thereafter.

Sometimes, reassignment, rotation, or transfer of a discontented party will restore a workgroup’s motivation level.

Survival is a powerful motivator. Some companies will circulate a rumor that they’re going to “job out” the custodial department. They can’t do this often, but once a year it may encourage some people to will work very hard. It is best under this circumstance to make it clear to the people that there will be bidding for their jobs. That wakes people up and gets them involved in what goes on. Then, listen to their ideas to improve the operation.

Some people get bored and need more motivation. Low motivation levels can be the result of work that underutilizes people’s capabilities.

The ideas and techniques above are summarized from another course by the author, “Management Skills for Maintenance Supervisors II.” This information was included because the same motivational rules hold for both maintenance supervisors and the maintenance ranks.

A little bit of attention to motivation will bring in major dividends in the way the custodial work force feels about their jobs, and ultimately, about themselves.

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