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Team Cleaning – Keeping Hospitality Healthy

By Allen Rathey — *posted 09/01/2007*

Albert Einstein is credited with saying, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results." Michael Lindsey knew he had to do something different. As the new executive housekeeper for a southern hotel property, his department had not met its budget for 15 years. Guest satisfaction scores (measured by a Guest Satisfaction Index or GSI) were lower than management hoped, and turnover among cleaning workers hovered around 90 percent.

Lindsey studied the problem and possible solutions. His conclusion: It was impossible to meet budget and quality goals using traditional methods. "We had to make changes," he recalls. "Team cleaning was the first thing that came to mind. In all of the articles I had studied, it seemed team cleaning was the answer to our dilemma."

On the other side of the United States, Rose Galera was also thinking about team cleaning. Galera was the executive housekeeper for a Hawaiian hotel. "The vice president I worked under always talked to us about teaming," she says. She began to wonder if the idea might work with cleaning workers.

Lindsey started the transition at his hotel by attending a team cleaning seminar. He picked a course offered by Jim Harris, Sr. of Concepts IV. "He was very honest, and that's what I was looking for. He let you know up front it's a time-consuming process and there will be a lot of growing pains."

Galera, who had been working in the cleaning field since she was a teenager, started crafting her own team-cleaning program—The Efficiency Cleaning System.

Both were convinced a team approach was a better way to clean. They also recognized it would be a tough sell in the hospitality industry.

"You have two unique challenges with hospitality," Lindsey explains. "First, stay-over guests don't like several people in their room at different times. Second, the budget has always been based on the number of rooms sold—not square footage." Galera adds a third obstacle. "A number of managers have a difficult time because they're so used to the traditional-zone approach." After successfully implementing team cleaning at several properties, each started their own consulting firms to teach hospitality professionals how to make team cleaning work. Galera is executive director of Clean Plus Systems II. Lindsey is president of Lindsey & Lindsey Consulting and Cleanology 911.

These two professionals say team cleaning is faster, better, and less expensive than a

zone approach. Here's why:

Haste, Waste & Efficiency

"In the old system, it would take 35 minutes to clean an occupied room," Michael explains. "We had only budgeted 28 minutes per room." Since transitioning to team cleaning, workers can turn a room in 10 to 12 minutes for an unoccupied room and just 24 minutes for a room with stay-over guests. Because teams were cleaning rooms faster, labor costs dropped. Lindsey says the hotel saved 25 percent in labor costs during the first year alone. He eliminated one supervisor position and turned that job into a working team-leader position. Besides reducing labor costs, he was able to provide consistent hours for his cleaning workers. "With traditional cleaning, there were days we may have sold 90 percent of the hotel and needed the maximum number of people to clean," Michael says. "Other days, only 30 percent of the hotel was sold, and people weren't getting their hours." With team cleaning, it didn't matter how many rooms were sold because Lindsey could afford to build detail and project cleaning into his budget.

Galera says team cleaning also saved on equipment costs. "You don't buy a vacuum for everybody," she says. "You buy one per team." The same applied to mops, buckets, and other cleaning tools.

Although equipment costs dropped, both managers said cleaning quality improved with a team strategy. Rose notes, "It's difficult for one cleaning worker to focus on everything that needs to be done as they go from room to room." Working as a team, she says, the workers attitude is, "There's a lot of cleaning to do, but there's two of us to do it."

Michael notes with a zone approach, cleaning workers were lucky to get cleaning basics done. There was virtually no time for any special cleaning. Those kinds of tasks would either be eliminated or performed infrequently at best. Not so with team cleaning. Because rooms are cleaned faster, crews have time to complete special assignments without compromising daily-cleaning needs.

Lindsey feels quality improves along with consistency. His says the backpack vacuums his teams use improve indoor air quality because they have superior filtration. Galera agrees. Her teams also use backpacks. She likes the way attachments let cleaning workers reach difficult areas. "With backpacks, you can go high, low, underneath, and above."

Both experts say team cleaning improves security for employees and guests. "You're reducing the temptation to steal," Lindsey says, "because two people in the room increases the likelihood of getting caught. That improves guest security."

Rose Galera adds, "When you're in the bathroom bent over the tub cleaning, you can't hear if somebody comes into the room." She adds, "I had a situation where the room cleaner locked herself outside on a porch several floors up. She climbed from one room to the other to get out. Two people can protect themselves better."

Lindsey and Galera both believe cleaning executives will see better results and bigger savings if they use team cleaning. The trick, they say, is developing a system that works for a specific property.

What Not to Do

Michael Lindsey says when hospitality professionals consider team cleaning, they make two very serious mistakes. "Traditional team cleaning won't work," he states. Traditional teams have four members who enter the room sequentially, each performing a specialized

task such as vacuuming, dusting, or emptying trash.

It doesn't work, Lindsey says, because guests who are staying more than one night don't like the constant interruption of a parade of cleaning workers.

Lindsey says the second mistake hospitality managers make is pairing the teams incorrectly.

Start Right

According to Lindsey, the most important aspect of team cleaning is putting the right people together. His system uses a two-person team. He initially pairs a strong person with a weak worker. "Either the weak person will kick it up or leave the organization," he explains.

He tries to pair people who are compatible. "You don't want best friends, but you don't want mortal enemies," he says. His goal is to eventually have two strong workers on each team. That keeps morale high. "A strong worker that's always having to pick up the slack for a weak worker makes for discontentment." Lindsey says it takes about a year to have the teams really mesh. He tries to honor requests from workers who want to be teammates, but he says managers should never guarantee that will happen. "You have to consider what is best for the property. If you can grant their request and still achieve that goal, that's great."

He emphasizes team organization will take some serious thought. "You have to take a lot of time and make sure you have the right teams put together. That's absolutely critical."

Dividing the Work

While Lindsey uses two person teams, Galera uses two and three person crews. In hotel cleaning, her crew of two is split into one worker to handle the bathroom and the other to take care of bedroom cleaning. For condominiums she recommends a three-person crew. The third person is responsible for vacuuming and window cleaning.

Lindsey's teams include one worker to clean and restock the bathroom and gather soiled linens. The second worker cleans the bedroom area, strips the bed linens, and vacuums. The team works together to make the bed. He says working together saves approximately one minute per bed.

The number of rooms each cleaning team covers depends on the room type. A traditional room size is 236 square feet and usually has double or king-sized beds. Suites are roughly twice that size. Teams are assigned 36 regular rooms or 18 suites. Suite cleaning requires the bathroom cleaner also clean the kitchen. The bedroom specialist is also responsible for the living room area.

Rose Galera says specialty teams are also a good idea. "Look at it from a sports approach," she explains. "You only bring in the special team for night turn-downs or check outs."

Lindsey has a special team member that handles callbacks. "Too many times with zone cleaning in a hospitality venue, the room attendant will knock on the door and be told to come back in a few hours. In team cleaning, we have a float person who comes and catches delayed services and early checkouts." That lets cleaning teams proceed through their floors without having to backtrack. The idea is to make it easy for teams to keep moving. "The last thing you want to do is stop the momentum," Lindsey says.

The float team member can also fill in for any absent employees on the regular cleaning teams. Lindsey says the ideal would be having a float team but most organizations can only designate one person for the job.

Besides the bedroom and bathroom specialists, Lindsey assigns a utility specialist for every six teams. This person is responsible for taking trash and linens to their respective shoots and for keeping carts re-stocked with soaps, shampoos, towels, and linens.

He admits workloading is a matter of trial and error. "We knew in traditional zone cleaning the typical attendant could do 16 rooms a day. We started out with 32 rooms and kept adjusting." According to Lindsey, time-to-task studies are not as accurate in hotels as in other environments because each room's occupants are often different. Parties in one room will leave behind a much bigger mess than a business traveler who only wants a place to sleep. "We just kept tweaking the number of rooms to give the teams about seven to seven and a half hours of work per day," he says.

Work is divided into routine, detail, monthly, and special projects. Routine work includes making beds, general daily cleaning, and wiping down credenzas. These tasks are done every day.

Detail jobs are pulling out credenzas and vacuuming behind them, vacuuming under beds and high level dusting. Detail jobs are done on the first day of the workweek, whether the room is occupied or not. Monthly cleaning includes turning mattresses and removing any trace of build up in bathtubs and showers. Ceilings are also cleaned.

Special projects are just that: items that require extra attention or effort, but may only need to be done occasionally.

The Right Training, The Right Tools

Under Lindsey's system, a new hire is put with his most experienced team leader. Zone cleaning would have required taking a supervisor off the floor to provide training. He says team cleaning integrates the newest employee without losing much productivity. New hires spend one day in the classroom to go over policies and procedures. They also watch a team-cleaning video. Then it's off to work with an experienced professional. "Show me how you do it," Lindsey explains, "and I'll show you the best way to do it."

Team leaders are trained by the executive housekeeper. "There shouldn't be any deviation from that," Michael cautions. "That's the only way to ensure consistency." "Cross training is also very important to ensure consistency and well-rounded workers with team cleaning," Galera says. Cross training involves teaching each worker the full set of specialties over time by rotating positions.

Team leaders and the executive housekeeper meet weekly to discuss ways to improve. Lindsey says some of the best ideas come from the front line staff. "We're cleaning smarter, not harder," he says.

Smarter cleaning means smarter tools. Galera and Lindsey both use backpack vacuums. "Uprights only let you do the floors," Rose explains. "You can't reach high places. With backpacks you can reach high, low, and everything in between."

She likes the backpacks for ergonomic reasons as well. She says besides being harder to transport from place to place, uprights require cleaning workers perform a push and pull

motion that moves between 14 and 16 pounds. “The backpack attachment is two pounds or less,” she says.

Rose also uses flat mops because they clean better and protect the cleaning worker. She says room attendants used to climb on the edge of the bathtub to reach the top of the walls surrounding the tub. Flat mops with telescoping poles allow them to clean without climbing.

The flat mops provide other benefits, too. “One of the things I never liked about hotel cleaning was being on my hands and knees to clean bathroom floors,” she says. Flat mops reach corners and tight areas and clean better than other types of mops.

Lindsey also uses flat mops and microfiber mop heads and cleaning cloths. He says the cloths are excellent on mirrors and glass and have eliminated the need for chemicals on those surfaces.

Retaining Employees

Since the hotel switched to team cleaning, Lindsey says, employee turnover has dropped from 90 percent to around 6 percent. “That had to save us twenty thousand dollars a year just in retraining,” he says.

“The main comment I hear from the staff is it’s fun,” Lindsey notes. “It’s boring to have a set of keys and be at the end of the hall by yourself. This puts fun and excitement back into it.”

He says the hotel spends US\$100 per month on gift cards from a local retailer. The team with the best attendance and highest overall customer satisfaction scores is recognized in front of their peers and awarded the gift cards. Lindsey says the contest spurred friendly competition that built morale and helped the hotel achieve its service goals.

Exceeding Expectations

At Lindsey’s property, the GSIs remained steady for the first month after team cleaning was introduced. After that, they climbed. Guest-approval ratings went from 89 percent to 95 percent and remained at that level.

Rooms are clean and ready when guests arrive. Lindsey says team leaders are able to turn rooms back to the front desk quickly because the team doesn’t have to wait for a room inspection.

Galera says team cleaning gives the property a marketing tool. An in-room notice tells guests their room is prepared and maintained by a team of cleaning professionals.

“I put my reputation and my career on the line when I recommended team cleaning,” Lindsey says. “You just have to keep tweaking it until you get the right combination.”

Rose Galera adds, “The idea is to have a win/win situation for employees, guests, and managers.” She says managers should also look at team cleaning from a health perspective. “You’re leaving the room healthier and better.”

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