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Zone or Team Cleaning: Which is better?

Writing in favor of Zone Cleaning

By Paul Regan

In the midst of a Team Cleaning blitz that seems to be going on all around us, I want to take a hard look at Zone Cleaning to see if there isn't some life in the old bird yet.

Last October, a *CM/Cleaning & Maintenance Management*® magazine online survey asked readers if they used a specific cleaning system. Surprisingly, 43 percent of respondents said they do not use a system such as Team Cleaning, Day Cleaning or Zone Cleaning.

My objection to Team Cleaning is not to the system, which has a lot going for it, but to the fact that its proponents label the 43 percent of respondents without a system as “zone cleaners.”

My goal here is to dispel the myths that team cleaners have dispensed about Zone Cleaning.

The biggest myth is this: Zone Cleaning is a non-standardized, haphazard, essentially seat-of-the-pants approach to cleaning.

Nothing could be further from the truth — it is akin to labeling Team Cleaning as gang cleaning.

Standardized zone systems consist of standard rates, workloads and schedules. Work is divided equitably and fairly. Frequencies are documented, standards are measured, and methods, procedures and training are the same for everyone.

It is also much easier to schedule. Everyone starts at the same time — no waiting for the “opener” to go part way through an area before starting the “closer.”

Another myth about standardized Zone Cleaning is that specialists are never used. I have been involved in this industry for more than 40 years and I have never worked in, supervised, managed or consulted in an operation that did not use specialists.

Restroom cleaning, trash removal, and floor work have all been organized that way when it made the most sense for an operation.

In the same way, Team Cleaning uses one-person “teams” when the facility calls for it. Where I come from, we call that Zone Cleaning.

Similarly, Team Cleaning claims all the advantages of backpack vacuums, ergonomic mops and dilution control systems as though they were unavailable to anyone in Zone Cleaning. Zone cleaners can’t even turn off lights!

Obviously, anyone still using such a backward approach must be unable to read magazines, are located in areas into which even the most hungry salesmen won’t penetrate, and don’t even watch the shopping channels to learn about microfiber cloths or mops.

In my practice, for example, the use of canister vacs was the standard for at least a generation before truly practical backpacks were introduced in the late 1980s by ProTeam.

Which brings me to the subject of vacuum specialists. With all due respect, sending two people into the same space when only one is needed is redundant.

Up to 95 percent of carpeted offices require weekly vacuuming at most, and sending a second custodian into such areas for the sole purpose of making sure that the trash is emptied is a massive waste of time.

Using a small carpet sweeper, readily carried with a barrel or a cart, reduces vacuuming time by 75 percent to 80 percent at the very least.

Travel time is the single activity that dominates a custodian's time, and when it is extended in order to separate tasks, then there are no savings.

Another claim made for Team Cleaning that any conscientious manager has to take into consideration is that of reduced equipment costs.

One vacuum for a team of four people, on its face, is definitely less expensive. Vacuums however have only so many hours in them, just as cars have only so many miles in them.

If one person is using a vacuum six hours a day, instead of three people using three vacuums two hours each day, each operation will, in the end, spend the same amount of money as the other.

Similarly, dusters hold only so much dust before needing replacement, dust mops can be used only so many thousands of square feet before needing laundering or replacement, and so on.

True savings range from minuscule to non-existent.

What proponents of Team Cleaning miss is this overriding truth: Standardization is the key to higher productivity, because it is the key to greater efficiency.

Team Cleaning is a standardized approach and a good one. Yet the same level of standardization can be brought to Zone Cleaning, an approach that has been proven since standardization was introduced into the cleaning field shortly after World War II.

The man who began it all was a visionary named Mo Sallworth. He introduced the Standards System in Cleaning, successfully bringing the practice of industrial standardization to the field of industrial and institutional cleaning.

It was Zone Cleaning. And back then, productivity improvements exceeded 50 percent.

Standardizing Zone Cleaning has produced, and is producing, labor savings indistinguishable from those of Team Cleaning. I say this not because I have done it myself, but because it has a track record of 60 years.

Finally, there is something valuable that Team Cleaning leaves behind, something that it Team Cleaning advocates dismiss as “old-fashioned.”

It is not unusual in our field to find very talented and dedicated individuals who are custodians because it is a profession in which they can work alone. They are not anti-social, but they are frequently loners without the greatest people skills who simply want to be left alone to do their job.

They are people I have come to respect a great deal for two very good reasons: They are usually among the best at what they do, and they are the ones I have learned the most from over the years.

They are, in some respects, the odd men and women out in other professions and have migrated to our field and found a home in cleaning.

There is no value in driving them out in the name of something that is new, but not better.

Team Cleaning is a terrific cleaning option, and ignoring its potential is foolish. However, do not adopt it simply because it is new.

Above all, work on standardizing your operation — that is far more critical than which standardized approach you use.

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