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Connecting Sustainability and Green Cleaning

by *Stephen P. Ashkin*
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Recently, the International Facility Management Association (IFMA) Foundation released a new book, “The Business of Green Cleaning,” specifically to help facility managers around the world connect sustainability and cleaning practices.

The book makes the case that the origins begin in 1993 when U.S. Presidential Executive Order 12873 (reauthorized in 1998 as Executive Order 13101) focused the purchasing power of the U.S. Federal Government on “environmentally preferable” products. This Executive Order defined “environmentally preferable,” which is used interchangeably with green, as “reducing the health and environmental impacts compared to similar products and services used for the same purpose.”

Based on this definition, green cleaning in its simplest form became defined as “cleaning to protect health without harming the environment.”



Refining the Definition of Green Cleaning



Green cleaning is best thought of as a concept or thought process that focuses on creating a healthy, safe and attractive building while minimizing harmful impacts. >> Photo courtesy of Enviro-Solutions.

This definition characterizes green as simultaneously addressing environmental and health impacts. This is particularly important because of cleaning’s labor-intensive nature, and the need to reduce harmful exposure to both cleaning workers and building occupants in addition to reducing environmental impacts. The definition further characterizes green as a comparison. It does not suggest that traditional cleaning products purchased or specified by facility managers are inherently bad for health or the environment. Rather, the definition aligns with the process of continual improvement where the emphasis of the improvement is health and the environment, rather than a more traditional selection criterion, which would place performance and cost as the highest priorities.

The definition goes on to state that the “comparison may consider raw materials acquisition, production, manufacturing, packaging, distribution, reuse, operation, maintenance, or disposal of the product or service.” While it clearly points to the entire life cycle of the products, it also recognizes improvements can occur during the operation and maintenance or use-stage of the products or service. This is particularly important because cleaning is labor or process intensive, and if used incorrectly, the potential benefits of a green cleaning program can be negated. This can actually result in increased health and environmental problems. Furthermore, life-cycle assessments of cleaning products typically indicate that the use-stage of cleaning products can represent more than 50 percent of the total impacts. This recognition has led to a further refining of the definition.

Evolving Concepts Minimize Harm

Green cleaning has evolved beyond just a specific product or service, and is best thought of as a concept or thought process that

focuses on creating a healthy, safe and attractive building while minimizing harmful impacts. It encompasses many concepts such as continual improvement, stewardship and other issues beyond just those associated with cleaning, health and the environment.

Operationally, green cleaning is tied closely to the concept of sustainability and the triple-bottom line (economic, social, environmental). The concept of sustainability is derived from the United Nations, which, in 1987, published the Report of the Brundtland Commission, "Our Common Future." The Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

While the cleaning industry is certainly not primarily responsible for today's global environmental problems, its impacts are significant due to the sheer size of the industry. Facility managers who specify and purchase cleaning products and services can make an important contribution to addressing these issues. This is especially true as green cleaning products and practices are now widely available. Facility managers can ask more from their suppliers, and ultimately purchase green products and services from green companies by insisting that their suppliers integrate these practices themselves.

Supplier Best Practices

In the U.S., the commercial, industrial and institutional cleaning industry (non-residential) is comprised of approximately 100,000 companies. Many of these have multiple buildings and numerous trucks, cars and other delivery and service vehicles, and all of which consume fuels and contribute to environmental impact. This represents an opportunity to select suppliers based on that supplier's sustainable practices. The industry itself manufactures and consumes approximately 6.2 billion pounds of chemicals. Most are made from valuable but limited and nonrenewable natural resources. Some can be harmful to human health and the environment during the extraction of raw materials, manufacturing, use and disposal. Supplier selection can be based on how they use more sustainable practices in their chemical purchases, use and disposal.

The industry consumes approximately 4.5 billion pounds of janitorial paper products, most of which are made from virgin tree fiber, resulting in a loss of approximately 30 million trees. Plus, the manufacturing, bleaching and disposal of these products have large environmental impacts and offer many important opportunities for improvement. However, a supplier's use of sustainable practices in its selection of janitorial paper products and dispensers can be used in the selection process.

Finally, and perhaps most important from an unmet or under emphasized part of today's sustainability effort, is that the cleaning industry employs approximately 4.2 million cleaning personnel. These workers may have long-term exposure to cleaning and maintenance chemicals, again, some of which are known to cause health problems. Plus, they use equipment that can cause musculoskeletal problems such as back injuries. Compounding that, many work part-time for low wages and without benefits — especially in the service sector — where the lowest bid is required for service companies to successfully compete for a facility manager's business. Consequently the opportunity to select suppliers based on how they use more sustainable practices to provide wages and benefits allows all workers in a building to have a sustainable quality of life

The Role of the Facility Manager



Accordingly, there is a sizable opportunity for facility managers to use green cleaning as an important part of their sustainability efforts. Today, green chemicals, paper, janitorial equipment, plastic liners and other items used in the cleaning process are widely available and cost competitive compared to their traditional counterparts. Product distributors and service providers offer outstanding training programs and can even assist with occupant education. But the real challenge is for facility managers themselves.

Today, poor cleaning programs and unkempt buildings are typically due to a lack of resources, will and commitment. The cleaning industry possesses the products and skills necessary to clean and "green" a building. The challenge to change by addressing the products, the environment and the people ultimately results in a facility manager's commitment to a functional program. After all, facility managers are the customers of the cleaning industry, and as the old adage goes "the customer is always right." If facility managers want their building to be green cleaned, today it is easier and more important than ever.



The opportunity to select suppliers based on how they use more sustainable practices to provide wages and benefits allows all workers to have a sustainable quality of life. >> Photo courtesy of Enviro-Solutions.

With green advances in the janitorial industry, it is now easier and more important than ever to have a facility cleaned using sustainable techniques. >> Photo courtesy of Enviro-Solutions.

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