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Getting to the Heart of Cleaning and Maintenance

by Rich Parillo

They say a cluttered desk reflects a cluttered mind. We can also say that a cluttered janitorial closet may reflect a custodial crew that is disorganized, lacks efficient training, and is generally unprofessional. Further, a messy closet can cause a lot of anxiety for cleaning workers that can impact their performance. Hunting for a cleaning tool, product, or chemical slows down worker productivity and can lower worker morale.

Although the topic doesn't come up often, occasionally an astute school administrator or campus facility manager will ask where proper cleaning and maintenance begins.

The answer is surprisingly simple: in the closet. Janitorial closets and supply rooms are the heart of a facility's maintenance department, and their appearance, organization, and cleanliness is often a good indication of just how well the entire facility is cared for.

They say a cluttered desk reflects a cluttered mind. We can also say that a cluttered janitorial closet may reflect a custodial crew that is disorganized, lacks efficient training, and is generally unprofessional. Further, a messy closet can cause a lot of anxiety for cleaning workers that can impact their performance. Hunting for a cleaning tool, product, or chemical slows down worker productivity and can lower worker morale.

On the other hand, a disorganized janitorial closet that has been "reborn"—made clean, bright, and organized—often results in an improvement in the cleaning workers' attitude, productivity, and professionalism. As an added benefit, overall safety is improved because only products used on a daily basis are stored in the janitorial closets or supply rooms, while unused products—especially older cleaning chemicals that can release fumes and gases—are removed from the shelves.

The Beginning of Closet Care

The first step in proper closet maintenance typically involves evaluating the current state of a facility's janitorial closets. Some may be in excellent condition, and we should not be surprised if the custodial crews using these closets are some of the most effective and productive on staff. However, others may be disorganized, with tools and equipment scattered about, unpleasant odors, and dirty floor and water areas.

If this is the case, the entire closet should be emptied. To make the job easier, place tables around the closet and put sprayers, cleaning chemicals, tools, and other items on the tables, arranging them by how they are used: window cleaning products in one area, floorcare products in another, etc.

It is often evident that there may be duplicates—even triplicates—of several items. Further, some items may not have been used for a long period of time or have even been forgotten.

Only one of each type of cleaning product for each of the cleaning workers should be returned to the closet. For example, if three custodial workers share a closet and all use window-cleaning solution, there should be only three sprayers in the closet filled with that product. Further, for safety reasons, only enough should be stored to last approximately a month. Because chemicals can release fumes that are dangerous and threaten health, for safety and space-saving reasons the original large containers are best stored in special closets specifically designated for bulk storage.

Before Restocking

But before any restocking of the janitorial closet begins, the closet should be cleaned from top to bottom. Ensure that the ventilation system is working properly. Through the years, these systems may have stopped working because they become clogged with dirt and dust. Remove and clean the grill, and vacuum-clean the vent.

Is the closet in need of painting? In many facilities, the last time the janitorial closets were painted was when the building was first constructed. In addition, check lighting. Proper lighting is necessary to help find items and prevent accidents, but many closets have no lighting whatsoever. A light controlled by the opening and closing of the door or by a convenient switch plate should be installed. Also, the light bulb should be covered with a fixture to help prevent breakage and to give the closet a professional look.

Also check the shelving. It should be securely affixed to the walls. Some building managers are now installing grill- or rack-type shelving, often found in restaurant kitchens. Many find this shelving helps improve ventilation within the closet and lets chemical spills fall to the floor, where they can be easily cleaned up.

Refilling the Closet

With the closet thoroughly cleaned as well as painted and properly lighted, if necessary, restocking items in the closet requires some planning. With all items still placed outside the closet, return tools and supplies according to their frequency of use, with those used daily at the front, making them the easiest to reach. Necessary items used less frequently or only occasionally should go toward the back of the closet.

Additionally, they should be organized based on how they are used: window cleaner in one area, furniture polish in another, and so on. Some facilities have developed a color-coding system to help organize their closets, placing a blue label, for instance, on a shelf designated for window cleaner and using another color to note floorcare products. Because English is a second language for many cleaning workers, color coding helps eliminate mistakes and promote safety.

Buckets should always be cleaned, rinsed, and allowed to air dry, as should mop heads. Keep as many items off the floor as possible. Hang mops from hooks on the walls. Never leave mop heads soaking in soiled water; it is unsightly and unprofessional.

Some larger items, such as vacuum cleaners and floorcare equipment, will need to be placed on the floor. This can be done neatly with equipment-related supplies stored near their equipment. Vacuum cleaner belts, for instance, should be found near the machines.

Earlier we mentioned that cleaning and organizing a closet could have a positive impact on productivity and performance — which can be a cost savings for administrators. Two recent studies — one by DYMO, which produces labeling systems for offices, and the other by business supply retailer Office Depot — seem to support this. Among the items reported in these surveys were the following:

- It can take 15 minutes per day for a worker to try to find something in a cluttered work area.
- More than half of the 2,600 supervisors surveyed said there is a link between an organized work area and improved worker performance.
- Every item lost by an employee due to clutter or lack of organization costs the employer approximately \$120, on average.
- Sixty-seven percent of workers have “given up” organizing their work areas because “they just do not know how to get organized.”

Fortunately, organizing a janitorial closet is relatively easy. It may take a little time, especially if the room needs to be painted, but this is offset by the benefits that are derived. And to keep the closet clean, organized, and in top shape, it should be put on the cleaning schedule and serviced on an ongoing basis. Remember, proper and effective cleaning and maintenance starts in the maintenance heart of a facility and is then reflected throughout.

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