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Many jan/san distributors have noticed that some of the facilities they work with go back and forth between contracting with a building service contractor (BSC) to handle their cleaning needs and hiring their own employees to have everything cleaned in-house. Which works best for one organization may not necessarily be the same for another.

For many organizations, contracting out their cleaning needs to a BSC has proven very successful. No employees have been added to the payroll, which can be a significant cost savings; the facility manager usually has just one contact person to call when problems arise; the janitorial service often provides all of their own cleaning equipment, another cost savings; and, because the BSC is independent, when problems comes up, facility managers do not necessarily have to be as "diplomatic" when discussing the situation, as may be required with an in-house staff.

For other facilities that now have everything cleaned by in-house personnel, it is not unusual to hear facility managers vow they would never hire a cleaning contractor again. After years of problems and complaints, they want their own janitors cleaning their facilities. One reason for this is that the cleaning crew is now part of the organization's "team," which sometimes results in closer attention to detail and a more thorough cleaning for their fellow employees.

The BSC revolving door

Often, the reason facility managers are unhappy with hiring BSCs is that they are obligated to hire the low bidder. And because the cleaning industry is so competitive, some BSCs bid as low as they can — often too low to do the job right — just to get the account, and then hope for the best. The result: as one contractor is hired

for the great prices, another is fired for poor service, and the process repeats itself on a regular basis, sometimes a couple of times per year.

An example of this occurred throughout the 1990s in Santa Rosa, Calif., a small city north of San Francisco. According to Mark Armstrong, facilities maintenance coordinator for the city, "We were continually spending time calling and writing letters . . . to address [cleaning] problems. It was a lot of administrative time that could be put to better use."

Although it is a cliché, Armstrong and his staff finally realized firsthand what the expression "you get what you pay for" really means.

After experiencing the "BSC revolving door," the city considered hiring its own janitors. However, they soon realized this would probably require the creation of an entirely new city department, the hiring of scores of new city employees, supervisors, and other personnel, and the purchase of thousands of dollars of cleaning equipment.

Rather than going in-house, they decided to end the low-bidder requirement and instead hire BSCs based on a "best-value approach." This system, which was started in 1999 and continues today, has proven to be much more successful. Although the city may pay more for contract cleaning, the service they are getting is far superior and the city no longer has to go through the bidding process every couple of years.

The best value approach

The city's cleaning specs for its facilities stayed the same when it switched to the best value approach; however, it did require Armstrong and his staff to do quite a bit more homework selecting a cleaning crew. Additionally, instead of just submitting bids and proposals, the BSCs were required to prove their ability and qualifications to do the city's cleaning — and do it well.

Along with proving themselves and their credentials to the city, part of the evaluation criteria included the following:

Questionnaires were sent to all bidders, asking such questions as: How many supervisors will be provided? Will the supervisors be full-time or part-time? Will they be shared with other accounts? Have the custodians cleaned 24-hour facilities, swim centers with showers and locker rooms in recreation facilities, and cafeterias and busy food service areas? All those responding to the request for proposals had to tour all the city's facilities and visually inspect them. The BSCs would be required to provide several current customer references of buildings that were similar to those they would be cleaning for the city. Armstrong's staff had to visually inspect the referenced facilities and meet with the managers of those buildings.

What about cost?

Even though cost no longer determined what company was hired, it still was a factor. It had to be based on the minimum number of cleaning hours required to maintain each city building — but to maintain them well. Quality took precedence over price. Using the best value approach, Armstrong said that the appearance and recommendations of one BSC stood out above all the others and he was hired, even though his was the highest bid submitted.

In this case, the city continued to outsource its cleaning requirements. And it worked because quality of work was more important than the cost. The same approach can be applied to those facilities cleaning in-house. In these situations, facility managers must hire staff based upon qualifications, training, and education, and must pay them well enough to make them want to do the job — and do it right.

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