



Collaboration is key to the success of a **green cleaning program**

By Patrick Pizzo, A.B.D., M.B.A.

JUST LIKE NO TWO BUILDINGS ARE IDENTICAL, no two sustainable, green cleaning programs will look the same. An effective program isn't cookie-cutter. Green cleaning programs are unique to each organization — designed from the inside out.

And a strong program starts with a strong leader that identifies the needs of their environment from the perspective of the building occupants, not from the viewpoint of the ideal we would like to achieve. Strong leaders set goals and look at the impact of change from all vantage points: health, safety and cost. They foster an environment for change to occur organically and lead by example. They do not create change independently or dictate.

This type of leadership starts with building a team to objectively examine and pilot new programs and procedures. The end program is only possible because of the support and input of the front-line workers and all stakeholders.

### Benefits Of Collaboration

When introducing any new green cleaning program, the path to long-lasting success is through collaboration. This means getting input from all levels of the organization. In a school, that means talking to the Board of Education, administration, teachers, support staff, etc., about what it means to be green and sustainable.

Too often, though, collaboration is considered a synonym for agreement, resulting in Groupthink. It's important to avoid this trap.

One solution may be to include people who have different opinions into the discussion-making process. When consensus is a product of varied, strong opinions — which were debated freely — the results will be supported and defended by the stakeholders involved.

In fact, for the best ideas to be identified, different perspectives are needed, even if those stakeholders do not share the same goal of what constitutes a green, sustainable environment. A solution can only be reached once

all scenarios are defined and analyzed.

Working together, collaborative groups should first establish a baseline of the current program. Building off of the existing program gives a starting point from which to launch something new.

Never move forward on any green alternative if it does not meet or exceed the efficacy of the established product or method. This is why even the ideas we are most excited about are piloted and carefully evaluated first. For example, changes that we have made in our schools are for green products that work better. Shortsighted change to an inferior green product can damage the standing of the committee.

The industry now offers many effective green products from which to choose. But it's important facility cleaning managers are cautious of products that over-promise or greenwash, which is green marketing deceptively used to promote the perception that products are environmentally friendly.

When choosing green products, even for managers that have done their homework, some failures are unavoidable. Failure, however, can be invaluable in that it can lead to further improvements in a finalized program. All worthy accomplishments will encounter some disappointments along the way; that is part of the process.

### A Winning Team

Building the right team and identifying a front-line worker to include on the committee to evaluate green, sustainable options is an important aspect of any sustainability program. Choosing an insightful leader — set in his or her ways and willing to defend a position — is the best option. If a plan can be developed that meets the approval of an insider who began as the biggest critic, the program has a chance to last.

Make this critic part of the solution, instead of shutting them out and making them a part of the problem. Ignoring the views of a critic gives his or her complaints

justification, which is the failure of the leader, not the worker.

When outlining a team, it may seem like a good plan to pick an ambitious, agreeable worker. But a person that is too open to new concepts may only be focused on moving up and out of their current position, instead of the needs and desires of the other front-line workers. It may make for easier agreements, but the program will soon fail as the needs and desires of the front-line workers have been ignored.

A winning team will include people that have different perspectives about green and sustainable programs, and who are willing to debate alternatives. Take products, for example. We have found that there are highly effective, cost effective, green products available on the market. Our research reveals that from the perspective of efficacy, green products work better if matched with a change in processes. But as with non-green products, all green products are not necessarily better. Some are better than others, which is why thorough evaluation of the product is key.

A strong team will debate and find a good green product to pair with the appropriate process. They will then provide training on that new process. This is important as many failed green initiatives are the result of not changing processes to match a manufacturer's recommendations for use of the new product.

## Branching Out

Although the cleaning staff has an important voice on the green cleaning team, they are not the only players. Successful facility cleaning managers will also look outside the school for key team members.

In the most effectively run school districts, there is a partnership between administration and all internal and external stakeholders. The reality is, we serve the needs of the children, and parents are the primary advocates of those children. If parents are going to support our initiatives, it is important that their concerns are heard.

Criticism of new initiatives is more often attributed to lack of transparency, not a poor plan. Absence of transparency leads to an information void, which is quickly filled by incomplete or misinformation. The best alternative is to share appropriate details with parents.

Oftentimes, what's best for the health of students is also best for the bottom line. Through evaluation of our own program, we have found that chemicals are often over-used and misused. This leads to unnecessary exposure to chemicals for the students and staff, decreased efficacy and waste. An understanding of the cleaning process, when evaluated collaboratively, can identify safer alternatives, which happen to be more cost-effective.

While it was not the initial goal of our sustainable committee to save money (our goal was to be cost neutral), this was a fortunate by-product. Cleaning effectively can best be achieved



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by identification of what needs to be cleaned and then performing the cleaning correctly. This can often be completed by the use of engineered

water and mechanical solutions in place of chemicals. If done properly, efficacy increases, while costs decrease.

The sustainable program at East Meadow School District is designed for the benefit of our students, with input from all levels of our organization and essential stakeholders. The success of the program is because it is our program, not the program of the administration. It provides the greenest, safest environment possible, using the best options currently available, and it has bent the cost curve down, not up, as new products were matched to new procedures. Going green has saved our taxpayers substantial money, while best protecting the health of our students and staff. **FGD**

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