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by Stephen P. Ashkin

American School & University, Oct 1, 2003


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Consider two common scenarios: the first is in a boardroom of a corporation looking to improve its bottom line; the second is in a boardroom of a school district seeking to improve fiscal efficiencies and student test results.

In the first case, the corporate leaders are discussing strategies to increase sales, reduce customer turnover, improve worker productivity and quality, and reduce overall expenses. At the school board meeting, similar discussions focus on reducing expenses, developing new curricula, and pursuing new technologies. In both cases, investments are evaluated based on the rate of return; quick payback investments take priority.

But in either scenario, a representative of the cleaning team rarely is represented at the table. When cleaning managers are included, they typically are asked to run their departments less expensively by reducing labor or other operational costs. In most cases, cleaning is viewed as an expense one that makes little contribution to the success of an organization.

Times are changing

Studies have begun to document what those in the cleaning industry have long believed: Cleaning is not merely an expense that keeps floors looking shiny and minimizes the number of complaints about the lack of toilet paper in the restroom. Rather, cleaning plays an important role in supporting the work of an organization's most important asset—its people.

Research conducted in Europe and the United States has shown the effects of the indoor environment on worker productivity and student performance. In the early 1990s a study by Michael Berry at the University of North Carolina's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center pinpointed improvements to the indoor environment accomplished through cleaning in a non-problematic building. The study involved members of the cleaning industry and used deep-cleaning methods, new equipment and cleaning supplies. The deep-cleaning process yielded the following environmental

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results:

- Airborne dust declined 52 percent.
- Total VOCs declined 49 percent.
- Total bacteria declined 40 percent.
- Total fungi declined 61 percent.

The research indicated that by reducing contaminants, better health outcomes could be expected, and these benefits could be achieved through following sound cleaning practices.

A study by Leonard Krilov that sought to measure how cleaning might affect health and attendance was published in the Journal of Infection Control. His research team looked at children in a childcare setting run by the Association for Children with Down Syndrome in Bellmore, N.Y. The research focused on how deep-cleaning strategies affected health indicators and attendance.

Their findings:

- Number of illnesses declined 24 percent.
- Number of doctor visits declined 34 percent.
- Number of courses of antibiotics declined 24 percent.
- School absences declined 46 percent.

Recently, Berry and another team of researchers studied the Charles Young Elementary School in Washington, D.C. to determine if student performance could be improved by improving the indoor environment without changing teachers, curriculum, technologies or other strategies that schools typically use. The school underwent a major renovation and changed cleaning methods in what had been an old and decaying school. The resulting improvements:

- Passing math scores on standardized tests increased by 51 percent.
- Passing reading scores on standardized tests increased by 27 percent.
- Attendance increased by 4.5 percent.

Better cleaning was not the only change at Charles Young; major renovations took place, and the improved indoor environment helped to boost teacher morale and retention.

Show me the money

In the movie, Jerry McGuire, the character played by Tom Cruise was asked repeatedly to Show me the money! Research shows better cleaning can improve health, attendance and even achievement scores, but those benefits need to translate into dollars and cents.

Researcher and consultant Judith Heerwagen has been assessing the effects of the indoor environment on worker productivity. Evaluating numerous studies, Heerwagen found that improving the indoor environment has boosted productivity anywhere from 0.5 percent to 7 percent (about three to 34 minutes saved per day).

Consider what a 0.5 percent productivity increase really means. Although it represents a tiny part of an eight-hour day, in the aggregate it can mean big bucks for a school or university. The cost of salaries and benefits in a Class A office building is about \$300 a square foot, according to the Building Owners and Managers Association; a 0.5 percent increase in productivity translates to \$1.50 a square foot.

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Thorough cleaning also can reduce absenteeism by eliminating many of the bacteria, viruses and other causes of illness. In that scenario, schools might come closer to a 7 percent boost in productivity.

Barry Moore of Opus Consulting found that in the Syracuse (New York) Public School District, attendance increased 11.17 percent after workers adopted an improved cleaning strategy. The attendance boost meant a \$2.5 million increase in state funding for Syracuse.

On to the boardroom

Representatives of the cleaning team need to go to the school boardroom and ask for a seat at the table. When electrical and lighting workers say they can reduce energy consumption by \$0.25 per square foot with upgraded equipment, ask them what the upfront cost will be to buy and install new lighting fixtures. A school may be able to cut costs just as well through better cleaning with a much lower upfront investment.

Ashkin is president of the Ashkin Group, Bloomington, Ind., a consulting firm specializing in greening the cleaning process.

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