

2003 SACUBO Best Practices

Custodial Services' Self-Directed Work Teams

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Abstract

Established during a time of reduced resources and increased workloads, the Self-directed Work Team approach to custodial operations has proved to be a successful initiative.

Designed to be truly self-directed, the SWTs do not have a supervisor. Instead, members are trained to perform these duties as a team. Work processes are changed if the majority agrees. A team member is removed for behavior or performance problems if the majority agrees that attempts to correct the problem have been unsuccessful. Together the team determines work distribution and schedules, maintains an inventory of supplies, schedules equipment repair and replacement, and controls key security. During unexpected absences the SWT is required to take on additional workloads until the team returns to full staff.

Increased satisfaction of both customers and team members has been the result. Team members make regular customer contact to stay abreast of concerns, problems, and scheduled activities. SWTs receive training and regular reinforcement in quality of work and customer relations, important determinants of customer satisfaction. In addition, because of the extra responsibilities, SWT members are compensated at a higher rate than non-SWT custodians. SWT members also enjoy the increased freedom and flexibility in work schedules that SWT participation affords them.

Introduction of the Organization

The University of Memphis is a comprehensive urban university committed to excellence in undergraduate, graduate, and professional education; the discovery and dissemination of knowledge; service to the metropolitan community, state, and nation; and the preparation of a diverse student population for successful careers and meaningful participation in a global society. The University offers 15 bachelor's degrees in more than 50 majors and 70 concentrations, master's degrees in 46 subjects and doctoral degrees in 21 disciplines, in addition to the Juris Doctor (law) and a specialist degree in education. The U of M campus is located on 1,160 acres with 201 buildings at more than four sites. The university enrolls more than 20,000 students each semester, and employs more than 2,500 faculty and staff.

The Department of Physical Plant provides custodial service; maintains the campus landscape; and offers full service for air conditioning, heating, plumbing, electricity, electronics, carpentry, painting. The department is also responsible for University construction contracts, major construction, construction inspection and room modifications. The department's goal is to maintain and operate University facilities in the most efficient, effective, economical, and safe manner possible.

Statement of the Problem/Initiative

With uncertain times and deep cuts in the state budget, and to reduce costs while maintaining the desired level of cleanliness for the University of Memphis campus, the Department of Physical Plant has formed several Self-Directed Work Teams (SWTs) in the Custodial Services area. The overall goal is to help front-line personnel take over the responsibility of supervisors while, at the same time, continuing to provide and improve upon their current levels of productivity. The formation of SWTs is a continuous and long process often expected to take from five to eight years. The transition to self-directed work teams marks a shift of authority from supervisor to shared authority for the whole team. In the end, the team is fully accountable for their productivity and the outcomes of their work.

Design

The self-directed work team approach was designed to enhance the qualities of already excellent employees – the approach creates the opportunity to make the best use of employees' strengths. In 1994 as the new University Library was being prepared for opening, the custodial employees working in the facility demonstrated a commitment to productive interactions with customers and the scheduling of shifts so as to achieve the

most positive effect on the facility. As the Department was deciding who would supervise this group, one of the employees suggested that they be permitted to continue to work without a traditional supervisor. Because of their excellent performance, the decision was made to allow them to continue under the present arrangement.

After committing to the self-directed work team, a number of issues had to be worked out. The number of employees assigned to the facility, the shift and area assignment for each employee, vacation schedules, equipment and supply needs, key control, time recoding, and the resolution of behavior and performance issues all were handled by the team in turn.

Designed to be truly self-directed, the SWTs do not have a supervisor. Instead, members are trained to perform these duties as a team. Work processes are changed if the majority agrees. A team member is removed for behavior or performance problems if the majority agrees that attempts to correct the problem have been unsuccessful. Together the team determines work distribution and schedules, maintains an inventory of supplies, schedules equipment repair and replacement, and controls key security. During unexpected absences the SWT is required to take on additional workloads until the team returns to full staff.

To fully play their role in the team, SWT members receive training in the concept of self-directed work teams, personal responsibility, communication skills/tools, conflict management, and teamwork. Each team member must participate and become involved in decisions that affect quality outcomes, and demonstrate respect and courtesy towards other team members.

Implementation

There are four stages in the formation of a self-directed work team. During the first stage, it is still very much traditional, authority-driven work environment. The team coaches the authority figure of the group who directly manages the team's activities. The coach makes decisions, provides the solutions to problems, and is generally an answer person in the team's work area, acting as a teacher and mentor to the team members. During the second stage, the coach should no longer be the absolute authority. S/he begins to share authority with other team members. Instead of making all of the decisions, the coach provides information to team members, thus enabling the team to make the decisions collectively. Importantly, the coach still acts as a coordinator and teacher to the team.

During the third stage of team formation, the team has been well-trained and gained some experience, and they are much more independent of the coach. They manage day-to-day activities and make decisions without interaction with the coach. At this stage, authority is truly shared among the team members; the coach serves to manage team boundaries and as a goal setter. At the final stage of team formation is a well-trained and mature team. The coach is no longer part of the team and plays the role of coordinator. In addition to managing all day-to-day activities, the team establishes long-term goals and is genuinely independent of the coach.

When completely formed as a self-directed work team, the team is entirely self managing. The coach acts as a champion of the team to upper management, and ensures that the team receives needed resources.

Benefits

Increased satisfaction of both customers and team members has been the result. Team members make regular customer contact to stay abreast of concerns, problems, and scheduled activities. SWTs receive training and regular reinforcement in quality of work and customer relations, important determinants of customer satisfaction. In addition, because of the extra responsibilities, SWT members are compensated at a higher rate than non-SWT custodians. SWT members also enjoy the increased freedom and flexibility in work schedules that SWT participation affords them. Further, the SWT members are now persistent promoters of employee empowerment, accomplishing more with less, and more cooperative attitudes with management and customers. Thus, these team members serve as positive and continuous role models for the rest of the staff.

Retrospect

In retrospect, the first year was the most difficult. However, fear of failure was a very strong motivator and helped pull everyone together. In addition, a supportive coach who is among the senior leadership within the Department has been critical to success. Our self-directed work teams had relatively little difficulty forming because they have received strong support from the Department. For example, with very few exceptions, decisions made by the team have not been overridden by superiors.

In addition, team members have found that employee discipline is not as difficult an issue to deal with as they had feared. Their approach is one of complete honesty with each other in terms of how they feel about something. This ability to openly and honestly communicate with each other on a regular basis is fundamental to the potential success of any self-directed work team.