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Custodial Closets

What does your supply closet say about your cleaning goals?

By Becky Mollenkam

For more than a decade, John Walker has been conducting audits of cleaning operations as part of his company's (OS1) certification program. He has visited thousands of facilities and, despite their varying levels of cleanliness, one thing is almost always the same — the custodial closets are a disgrace. "Just about every closet I've ever been in says, 'We don't know what we're doing,'" says Walker, owner of ManageMen in Salt Lake City, Utah. "It tells a story about the management and the training program."

What story do your closets tell? Chances are you don't know because "janitors' closets are basically invisible to everyone in the world, including the janitors," Walker says. "No one looks in there." Closets tend to be overlooked because too many other spaces rank higher on the housekeeping department's priority list. Plus, does it really matter if a storage room is in shambles? Yes. In fact, the appearance of custodial closets is often directly related to professionalism and service level.

"Confusion and disorder causes stress," Walker says. "When a whole organization operates out of messy, dirty, confused workspaces, it creates a lot of stress. The big thing we've noticed with our program is when we get them set up, the workers' attitudes change. I think the fact that we are so non-professional with the way we work with our tools creates a tremendous amount of stress in the jan/san industry."

The best janitorial operations have closets that reflect their company's cleaning mission, from the aesthetics of the room to the types of products stocked inside. It is also important to remember that the custodial closet is a janitor's "office" and should be treated with as much respect as other workspaces in the building. "We're not ignoring their areas and treating them like second-class citizens," says George Denise, general manager of facilities at Adobe Client Solutions, Cushman & Wakefield, in San Jose, Calif. "Our job is to provide a neat, clean, productive workplace and that applies as much to the janitor's work area as it does the other employees' work areas."

To determine what message your custodial closets are sending about your operation, spend a day visiting each area and critically evaluate their appearance and function. You are likely to discover much room for improvement. Most housekeeping managers cannot design their closets from scratch. Instead, they must work with the space they have. These five tips can help you make your closets work harder and look better.

1. Purge



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Most housekeeping managers say they simply don't have enough space in their closets to keep them neat and tidy. In many cases, however, the problem isn't insufficient space, but surplus supply. "A lot of organizations have a pack-rat mentality and have things from years and years

ago," Walker says. "They bought a case of something five years ago to try it out and it didn't work, but the case is still sitting there." To free up space in a closet, Walker suggests selling, donating, or pitching anything that hasn't been used in the last nine months. Keep on hand only the equipment, chemicals and other supplies used to clean that building. Also avoid repetition; stock only one type of glass cleaner instead of five or six. Inventory should be limited to a few days' supply — only enough to last between restocking days. This scaled-back approach allowed Walker to help one client go from 2,000 chemicals in the closet to just 75.

2. Prioritize

Stock only those items that reflect your cleaning mission (this is particularly important for organizations focused on being environmentally friendly). While this idea sounds elementary, Walker has visited LEED-certified buildings that have harsh solvents in the custodial closet. Implementing green cleaning practices has several benefits in the janitor's closet. Green products reduce the amount of product that must be stored because they are designed to lessen waste both in usage and packaging. For example, dispensing systems that calibrate mixing of chemicals ensure correct portions and reusable microfiber cloths can compliment or sometimes take the place of disposable dust mops and paper wipes. Green products, which are typically less harsh than their traditional counterparts, can also make the closet a safer place for workers. "In the janitor's closet we're storing cleaning chemicals and, depending on the nature of those chemicals, that may be an issue for the janitors," Denise says. "The janitors are going in and out of the closets all day and night so these areas need to be safe and healthy places."

3. Organize

Employee safety should also be top-of-mind when organizing the custodial closet. One potential hazard that can be eradicated is mold, which can have a negative impact on indoor air quality in the closet, as well as the whole building. Ideally, a ventilation system helps reduce dampness, but this is a costly item to install if not included from the start. Janitors should be instructed to rinse and wring out the mops before hanging them. There should also be designated hangers or racks for mops over a slop sink or bucket so drainage can be controlled.

All other tools should also have specific storage spots. Hang dispensing systems on the wall to reduce floor clutter. If possible, install hangers for backpack vacuums and other equipment so they are at shoulder height, eliminating the need for bending and lifting. Likewise, ergonomics dictates that chemicals and paper products be stored on shelves, not in boxes stacked on top of each other. "You don't want janitors reaching over things and being in an un-ergonomic position,



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straining and hurting themselves,” says Denise, who has a cabinetmaker developing custom shelves for the 45 closets in Adobe’s three buildings.

Use restaurant-grade rack shelving or another system that can support the weight of so many products. Consider putting shelves on wheels to make it easier to clean behind them. For safety’s sake, store supplies at least 18 inches away from sprinklers and smoke detectors. It is also important to label everything to reduce the possibility of dangerous chemical mishaps. Labeling (as well as material safety data sheets, OSHA information, and other notices) should be posted inside the closet and near products and equipment and in English, Spanish, and any other languages spoken by the staff. Use labels to also keep clutter at bay. Walker suggests posting inventory cards that include maximum and minimum counts for each item. “There’s a place for everything and everything in its place,” Walker says.

4. Beautify

A tidy closet is a giant step in the right direction. Even better, however, is an aesthetically pleasing closet. It may be out-of-sight to 90 percent of the building’s occupants, but the custodial closet is front and center for housekeeping staff. Why not give them an appealing place to call their own? “I think that we need to keep in mind that for some cleaning staff this is their personal work area,” says Jimmie Baker, associate director of University Memorial Center in Boulder, Colo.

Paint is an inexpensive way to make any space sparkle. Refresh the walls and floors with coats of light-color paint, which reflect the light and make the closet appear larger and brighter. Painting concrete floors has the added benefit of sealing them to avoid dust or mold. Also, make sure the room is well lit even if it lacks windows. At University Memorial Center, staff members display family photos and other personal items in the closets, creating a sense of ownership and pride for the space. “If you have an old incandescent light hanging down with a broken cord and the closet was left off the painting schedule forever and no one cleans the floor, what message does that send to the workers?” asks Walker. “It takes nothing to clean it and make it look good.”

5. Familiarize

The only way to have a successful closet maintenance program is to make it part of the department’s routine. And that’s just what has happened at Nike Inc. in Beaverton, Ore. “The closet is just as important as cleaning the rest of the facility,” says Nike’s custodial manager Annette Kraemer, whose staff manages 55 custodial closets. “We have written procedures for cleaning the closet, stocking the closets, setting up the cleaning cart and putting away tools at the end of the day. We do initial training with those instructions and enforce it by routine inspections.”

After training, post cleaning procedures and expectations in the closet, add closet cleaning and stocking to employees’ task checklists. Every time someone goes into the closet, they should



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spend one minute straightening up the space. It may also help to put an employee in charge of each closet. “We assign closets to individual staff members who oversee and maintain the areas and I believe it creates ownership and pride in how the closets are maintained,” Baker says.

“Typically they are randomly assigned but consideration is made for assigning closets closest to the work areas for each staff member.”

Supervisors must also take a proactive role in closet maintenance. They should inspect the closets as frequently as possible, at least once a month. Creating a checklist for these inspections can help workers and supervisors understand expectations. “We periodically inspect them during the month and if we see something we don’t like, we mention it in our weekly meetings with our night supervisor,” Denise says. “We talk with them each week and discuss issues that come up.”

On one such inspection, Denise discovered that a contractor was dumping paint in the slop sink in a custodial closet. He was able to quickly contact the contractor about correcting the problem. “I’ve been in this industry for 20-plus years and most janitors’ closets I see are dirty, dingy, unkempt and messy,” Denise says. “They are out of sight, out of mind. But good managers require periodic inspections of janitor’s closets and respond to their employees’ needs.”



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Do's and Don'ts In The Custodial Closet

Custodial managers should pay close attention to the custodial closets within the facility. Cleanliness, storage options, layout and supplies all play a significant role in the effectiveness of the cleaning crew.

Watch for:

- Multiples of the same product — Are managers purchasing too much?
- Varying brands of the same product — This may cause confusion among cleaners.
- Cleanliness — Messy and unorganized closets become a safety issue and can take workers longer to organize materials necessary for cleaning tasks.
- Equipment quality — Cleaning will not be effective if the equipment that is used is dirty itself. Overfull vacuums emit dust back into the air, dirty cloths spread bacteria and can leave a film on surfaces, torn squeegees leave streaks, etc.
- Storage options — Are shelves too high, making it difficult to reach chemicals? Is there adequate space available to access all the necessary cleaning equipment? Are shelves labeled for easy product identification?
- Access control — Regulate who has access to the janitorial closet.
- Missing or incorrect products — Microfiber is known to walk off and some workers bring in their own cleaning products to get work done. Discourage employees from using outside products and monitor inventory to prevent theft.
- Follow recommendations for product storage — Flammables, paint or oils should be kept in designated storage areas, not near other cleaning products.
- Product information — Post MSDS and other safety/training materials in each cleaning closet so it can be accessed by staff.
- Consistency — Make sure each cleaning closet within the facility is laid out the same. Doing so creates consistence for the staff.

— Corinne Zudonyi