

A Professional Custodian

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**I think I am the
Best.**

Do You?

**We provide the
environment that
allows people to
succeed.**

**We have to Make
Choices**

**Custodians are
Professionals**

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<http://www.aprofessionalcustodian.com>

The Challenge

I often tell people that I am the best all around janitor in these parts; Maybe the state. I say it with a smile. I don't mean to be cocky, but I do mean to be proud of my work, and I do mean to challenge my coworkers and supervisors. For all around efficiency, knowledge, quality, and safety; when it comes to maintaining a building environment, I think I am it. Extraordinary, What?!

Often, the reaction mimics that attitude; smiles to my smiles. A “yeh, yeh” from friends and co-workers who hear me all the time. A shake of the head, maybe; from those who don't know me. No arguments though. Outside of the trade, the reaction is more along the lines of, “... and what's that get ya?”

I have to reply, “Not much, What! Less than \$30 grand a year, for sure!”

Therein lies the dichotomy all custodians experience; the usefulness of our job, with the regard, and reward, it is given in the outside world. We directly impact the lives of the many citizens who work in, or entrust their children to, our public buildings. We provide an environment that allows them to be productive. We provide the tools and opportunities that enable our citizens, and their children, to succeed. We allow hundreds of people to interact for success, every day, without harm, injury, or detriment to their health. That is our duty and our success. Their success is our success. What can possibly be more useful than that?

I know I directly impact the lives of many people. Late at night, when the building finally empties, I am like the ventilators. I am maintaining the environment, readying it for the next round of success. Unlike the ventilators though, I have choices. These choices are my responsibilities and are many; their limits are my time and opportunity. My job cannot be outsourced, because these choices have to be made. That is what makes me the best. I know my role. I know what I can and cannot do in the time allotted. I know how to get it done.

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**We Control &
Remove Harmful &
Degrading
Substances Within
Our Environment**

**We Provide,
Manage, & Control
Events Within Our
Environment**

**We Create, Manage,
Adapt & Perform
Efficient Routines
Required By Our Use
of Public Money**

**We Perform A
Contract of Mutual
Benefit for Both
Public and Us**

What We Do

So, how many times have you heard it; “Everybody can clean.”

And, as a custodian or manager of custodians, how do you respond?

My answer; “Sure ... many can clean fast. Some can clean well. But very, very few can clean fast and well, day in, and day out, a couple of thousand hours a year.” When I say that, I am talking about the professionals in our business. These professionals start with the awareness of their importance and usefulness, as we discussed last. Experience and knowledge combine in the creation of an efficient routine. Their consistent performance of this routine produces a high level of efficiency and productivity. In short, they are professionals.

Professionalism in its most general meaning is commitment to, and high performance of, service. We expect nothing less out of our doctor or lawyer, when we pay them directly. They are of service. At its most concise purpose, professionalism means doing the job as well as possible, in as little time as possible. In short, professionals maximize the return on the investment in them. It is called efficiency by the doers, and productivity by the assigners. Either way, it is a contract for benefit to both parties.

That applies whether you are a doctor, lawyer, accountant, or most especially, teachers, administrators and public building maintainers. Why? We are users of public money. Public service, our service, demands that return on investment. The public, as user and as provider, is always at our door. Use of our services and facilities is mandatory for most, at some point in their lives. Since the user public decides how much we have to spend, a contract is required. We must be of service; the contract must be of benefit to both parties. Late at night and very early in the morning, we are on the front line of the battle to maintain public health. That battle, requires professionalism to be a part of our task; a contract, not just a concept.

I would argue that the keystone to professionalism, that effort to attain maximum return, is the application of knowledge through a proper routine. This is precisely what it is with environmental maintenance. We renew, we remove, and we control, harmful or degrading substances. We provide, we manage, and we control, events within specific environments. We know the secret to doing this efficiently is the routines we establish.

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**Maintenance &
Preparation of
Environment for Use
Each and Every Day**

**These Environments
are Multi-Use**

**We Do Not Have
Choices about Which
Environment We
Serve**

**We are on the Front
Lines of Public
Health & Safety**

**Public Service is
Demanding and in
High Demand**

Support is Critical

**Professionals Keep
the Personal Out,
Focus on Public
Expectations**

The Objective

Last time, we discussed a focus of the custodial professional as developing, implementing, and adapting the necessary routines. A necessary adjunct to that is a focus on the objective. To do that, we need to understand the necessary focus through the lens of the public employee. A lesson I had to learn; and something, that I see in few of the employees that have come through my workplaces.

Our service does not exist solely for profit. It is mandated and paid for by the public. We cannot pick which buildings, jobs, or tasks we will perform. Our buildings must be prepared every day they are used. That is our objective. Seemingly chaotic, public buildings enable the coming together of a diverse lot of people for a common purpose. They are multi-use and/or multi-input facilities. Non-performance of our task in the singular, private environment of an office building does not have the same possible consequences as ours. Likewise, custodians responsible for these environments are daily exposed to multiple health issues and safety problems. We cannot avoid them. We have to deal with them.

In return for being on the front line of public health and safety, we are offered a wage, benefits, and a degree of protection. Let's face it square on. People are seldom fired in public service. People are not perfect, and public service is highly demanding and in high demand. Problems are moved, promoted, or retired. That is the nature of the beast. The consequence is that we must work as a team that includes these problems. Those without focus on the job, see it as either kiss butt, or butt heads. It becomes personal. They have lost the objective.

For the professional, bosses matter little in the performance of daily routine. They matter greatly in the ability to perform that routine. A professional's focus is on the objective; maintenance and preparation of the environment. When I accepted my current job, I was asked to take pride in my work. I do. It is what motivates me every day. I feel the public is entering my house. But those above me must back me up. They must provide the training, tools and supplies, repairs, systems, and policies that allow that pride. Without these resources, my focus cannot be on the job. Often, supervisors do not appreciate that dedicated employees expect those above them to be as good, and to work as hard, at their jobs as the employee does theirs. Ask me to take pride in my job; you better take pride in yours. As a "good" employee, I will challenge you.

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What is it we
Demand from Any
Service?

It Meets Our
Expectations

Expectations Exist
at Every Level of
Public Service

Expectations the
Building Blocks

Communication the
Keystone

Expectations

In this series of articles, I have been presenting a road map for the service professional. My area of interest is the public service environment, specifically within facility management and operations. I have pointed out that this operating environment represents a service at its highest level. We are providing our community the resources and the environments to grow themselves and their children safely. I have argued that, as we are users of public money, the challenge is to maximize efficiency. Service professionals recognize that need. I have shown that professionals implement routines that determine this efficiency. I have identified the object, preparing the facility for the next day, as the focus of each employee, manager, and administrator. I have shown that for the service professional, this must not be a top down process. You cannot just order efficiency and capability, it can only be enabled. Those on the front line must commit to performance of the necessary routines, the supervisor/manager/administrator must commit to their support. Easily said, but seldom done.

At the end of the last article, I suggested Management of Expectations as a vocabulary and a means for getting this done. A service professional lights up at that phrase and pays attention; for it is the heart of what we do. We may not be able to phrase it that way, but we instantly feel the connection. Why? What is it; that we demand from any service? It is that the service meets our expectations. Indeed, in this series, I will show you that Service Quality, our destination in this roadmap, is defined by that very phrase; *It meets our expectations*.

When you go to a doctor, you expect to feel better. When you go to a teacher you expect to learn something. When the public uses our facilities, they expect to be safe and free of exposure to harm. Expectations drive the whole service process. As we will see in the next article, for users of public money, the expectation burden is greater in the reliability and assurance determinants of service quality. We will understand that the level at which these expectations are met determines quality of experience. This shows the need for a service professional to understand the expectations of the user of our facility. Indeed, this understanding of the public expectations by employees must be built into the whole system. Managing these expectations should be first order of business for every participant in the operation, board member to sweeper.

Expectations have to be laid in at each level of participation. Administrators and boards must manage the expectations of the users of our facilities. Supervisors and foreman must manage the expectations of administrators and boards, so that public expectations for each facility are reasonable and met. Supervisors must also manage the expectations of those under them. The first step is to expose them to the fact that expectations exist, clearly defined, and must be met.

Last article, I described the expectation given to me by my boss upon hiring. "I need somebody who takes pride in their work."

Cont. Pg. 6

Service Quality is Meeting Expectations

Expectations are Perceived and Evaluated on Perceptions

RATER

- *Reliability*
 - *Assurance (greeting)*
 - *Tangible facets of the firm and the service*
 - *Empathy*
 - *Responsiveness*
-

A Vocabulary for Success

We decided last time, that a necessary ingredient for the development of the service professional is awareness and management of expectations. On an individual level, the employee must know the expectations of those within the organization. They must be aware that these expectations are driven by the expectations of our customer; the public. The ability to communicate these expectations to those above/below the employee should be the key to movement through the system. Employees that understand this framework should be in the positions that most directly contact the education or health professionals who provide the service or the public. Expectations can only be known, and therefore, acted upon through communication.

Until now, we have talked of things about our business that we know, if not implicitly, at least intuitively. As I said, last article, things easily said but seldom done. Even our discussion of expectations is intuitive. We know, once we hear it, that service is driven by expectations. Our internal dialogue uses the word all the time when it comes to all things service. But if all that is true and expectation is the building block of service and service quality, and therefore we must manage expectations.... Well what do we really know about expectations? Where do they come from? How they are formed? Most importantly, how are they perceived?

If communication of expectation is a keystone, we need a vocabulary. Here we need to bring in some help. We turn to academia, for research on what parameters customers use to evaluate Service Quality. I was introduced to this research and attempt at developing a rating system in a service marketing course. Service marketing is a discipline built on the study of customer expectations. At the time of my introduction, the results of the work of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry were becoming established in a system called SERVQUAL. Their research showed that the difference between expectations and their perceived results determined Service Quality. This became the standard definition of service quality. They used 10 aspects of expectation, but these have been refined into 5 particular categories since then.

Organized and remembered by the acronym RATER, I have listed the broad categories identified in the left panel.

Further research, showed that the relative importance of these categories of expectations depended upon the importance (intuitively) and type of service being performed. Hey; How important is the education and health care of your children?

“The Challenge” from Pg.1

I have learned in each environment, what is the best choice for the people who use that environment. I am efficient. Those decisions make me useful and professional, and those are good things to be. They are why I say I am the best. My challenge, always; is why don't you?

“What We Do” From Pg. 2

We know that a proper routine can produce expected results. These expected results are required at all levels of environmental maintenance. Whether we are aware of it or not, our daily working life is the creation, management, adaptation, and performance of a routine. That is what all service professionals commit to do, and that is what we must do. How well we do that is our professionalism, it is a function of our knowledge and our commitment, and it is expressed daily through the performance of our routines.

“The Objective” from Pg.3

As an employee, of course I believe that there are no bad employees. Rather, there are just mostly indifferent, supervisors, managers, and administrators. My business education seemed to support that assertion. There is a role for everyone to perform. Supervisors have to build employees that understand there is a commitment, and why it exists. Managers have to build supervisors who know how to encourage, or not hinder, development of that commitment. Administrators have to ensure that this commitment is present in both interviews and continuous development training programs.

Often, within and without our custodial effort, it boils down to management of expectations. I have reached the point in public service employment where my purpose is on the objective. I no longer butt heads with bosses. Instead, I try to manage my expectations of them. I manage their expectations of me. I manage the expectations of the public, students, and athletes that use my area. I pick my fights. I try to limit my fights to ones that affect the public's health and safety. That is being a custodial professional in public service, and the source of the challenge presented in the first article of this series.

“Expectations” from Pg.4

That is an expectation that a professional can work with; but only if the environment of support necessary to accomplish that expectation exists. Expectations must be reasonable within the framework of the objective; readying the facility for its next and continuing use.

We have an operating environment driven by expectations. What is the keystone? It, and the building block for expectations, is communication. While much research is, and has been done, on the dimensions of what determines the expectation of users of a service, we cannot really know until we ask. School boards must ask, as they represent the user. Administrators and managers must establish dimensions of the routines. Employees define and implement routines through the performance of tasks. Communication of expectations at, between, and within, each level is demanded. Efficiency is refined, Service Quality is the result. We don't have to be great at our task, we just, must meet the expectations. We can manage those expectations. We can be professionals.

“Vocabulary for Success From Pg. 5

Notice also, the emphasis on perception in the previous paragraph. This is where I first became aware of perception as reality in the service business.

While academia oftentimes researches the obvious, sometimes the obvious must be pointed out. Once we see that list, we can intuitively understand that it makes sense. We expect service to be **Reliable**. We love the **Assurance** that professional demeanor and appearance seem to demonstrate. We know what to expect out of a well branded (**Tangible**) service. We dream of a service **Empathic** enough, flexible enough, to tailor their service to our particular needs. Finally, we stay with a service that **Responds** when those needs change or problems arise. If we perceive a non-negative response in those 5 categories, then we have received (perceived) service quality.