



Housekeeping

by Elizabeth Kozlowski

A clean back-of-the-house is just as, if not more important, as clean guest areas

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A hotel's housekeeping department should focus primarily on keeping the front-of-house (FOH) areas clean and in good repair. The back-of-house (BOH) areas naturally have to be put on hold to make sure that the areas the guests see are spotless. After all, the paying guests are the ones who need to be served first; and especially in these trying economic times, with many travelers on a tighter budget than usual, the expectation of getting one's money's worth has increased drastically, regardless of whether the guest is staying at a Motel 6 or a Four Seasons property.

Busting the BOH misperception

Generally, BOH areas are only seen by the employees. Whatever is lacking can be put on the good old "to-do" list and gotten around to eventually, right? Wrong! That way of thinking could not be further from the truth. Sorry to say one has been misled thus far, but far less remorse should be felt for this transgression than if one were to mislead multitudes of employees in the workplace to buy into this mindset. The BOH areas are indeed as equally important as the FOH areas.

The FOH includes the areas that guests and other visitors have access to such as the lobby, restrooms, function rooms, and food and beverage outlets. The BOH includes areas generally reserved for employee use such as kitchens, employee cafeteria, hallways, stairwells, offices, locker rooms, and service landings on the guest floors.

It is tempting to feel that FOH should take precedence over the BOH due to the nature of the lodging business: serving guests. Just as when friends come to visit at one's home, one may not take the time to clean the entire house for their arrival. If the bedrooms are a little messy, one can just shut the doors; but make sure that bathroom is spotless as well as the living room and dining room!

However, there are some key differences between homes and hotels that should be noted. There are no inspectors who come to judge the cleanliness of the home and, if it is not up to par, impose fines or shut down the home. House guests tend not to wander in areas where they weren't invited. Family members do not leave the family due to poor morale and go look to join another family. Being able to see the big picture can go a long way.

Kitchens and break areas

One of the most serious responsibilities a hotel has is to keep kitchens clean. This is one area that undoubtedly affects both guests and employees in many ways. The cleanliness of all kitchen areas is essential to prevent cases of food borne illnesses. Besides the chefs who have their own responsibilities in the way of proper food handling, the stewarding team is the key to making this happen. The different jobs within the team are too numerous to discuss here in detail but one aspect to



focus on is the overnight cleaning team. In many hotels, the overnight housekeeping manager is in charge of both the housekeeping and stewarding teams.

Besides the main duties of stove/oven cleaning, mopping floors, and removing garbage, one must be able to think outside the box to catch the small details. For example, pipes along the ceiling and even the ceiling tiles themselves pose a threat when dust collects on them and subsequently falls into food. Drains should be cleaned regularly to prevent debris buildup that attracts vermin. There is nothing more embarrassing for an establishment than to have a subpar health inspection grade posted in the window where guests can see it. The manager needs to lead the team to understand the importance of food safety, because ultimately, if the kitchen is shut down by the health department, everyone is out of a job until the violations are corrected, not to mention the negative word of mouth that will spread very quickly. It is a lose-lose situation.

One area in particular that one might not immediately think of but is still included on the health inspection report is the employee cafeteria. Similar to the guests, no manager wishes to have his or her employees fall ill. In hospitality, employees work odd hours, long shifts, or even double shifts. The cafeteria may serve as the main source of nourishment for many employees. Providing fresh, well-prepared meals keeps employees energized. Unlike the guests, employees are able to view the conditions of the food service area and the hygiene of the chef who prepares it. Everyone needs to be the eyes and the ears of safety and sanitation to point out deficiencies.

Halls, stairwells, and points of entry

Hallways and stairwells are an important component that should not be overlooked since they are most likely the first areas that visitors see. Oftentimes, a stairwell leads down from the employee entrance to a lower level where the Human Resources department is located. If these areas are littered with garbage, debris, or maintenance supplies, what kind of first impression does that make? It could turn off good candidates from wanting to work there. Imagine a candidate coming in for a job interview and experiencing that. A job applicant is expected to be dressed impeccably and on time for their interview but the hotel cannot go out of its way to make sure it looks good for him or her?



Even outside contractors and delivery persons are important to impress. It can be easy to think that they don't pay attention or have much of an impact on business. However, if you consider the number of hotels these contractors and delivery persons visit each day or in a week, many of them competitors, it becomes easier for them to notice the differences among each. The "word of mouth" concept applies to all non-guest visitors as well. It may come up in general conversation with others or if they have friends or family visiting from out of town and are requesting suggestions at which hotel to stay. Do not underestimate this valuable resource. Delivery personnel know where the cleanest hotels, restaurants, and kitchens are located, and they interact with multitudes of managers and outsiders. The influence resulting from their recommendations can be tremendous.

It is important to note here that the stairwells are especially important because they are arguably half-FOH and half-BOH. Many

people have a fear of elevators, heights, or tight spaces so will opt to use the stairs instead of the elevators. Also, in the case of an emergency evacuation, the stairwells are the only option. In high-rise hotels, it is also not entirely that uncommon to find a guest running up and down the stairs for exercise. This poses a special need to have the stairwells cleared of debris to avoid a slip and fall. Although not intended as an annex of the fitness center, it is still a part of the property and the hotel can be liable should a lawsuit arise.



Offices, locker rooms, and storage areas

Offices and locker rooms are two particularly important areas for employees. For some staff such as sales and accounting employees, the office is where the majority of their day is spent. A bright, clean workplace keeps the employees alert. There are some offices the housekeeping team may not have full access to for security reasons (e.g., accounting, human resources) but all offices should be kept dust-free, with surfaces wiped and carpets vacuumed. Allergens and germs can easily be spread in close quarters among employees. A periodic extraction of the carpets also removes additional dust, dirt, and stains. Keep in mind that sales personnel often conduct site inspections of the hotel with potential clients which may include a stopover in the sales office to fill out paperwork. Likewise, the Director of Rooms or Hotel Manager may conduct an interview in his or her office. Hence, cleanliness will be assessed by outsiders during the process.

Locker rooms are the closest area any employee has in the hotel to some personal space. Their work shift begins there as they change into their uniforms. Clean bathrooms and floors will make employees feel more comfortable and also promote good hygiene. Unfortunately, most employee locker rooms are not maintained in the most sanitary condition as the rapid changeover of employees throughout the day makes ensuring cleanliness a daunting task. Therefore, all employees play an important role in clean locker rooms simply by throwing garbage in receptacles, placing hangers on racks, and returning dirty uniforms to be washed.



Generally, each guest floor has a service landing or housekeeping closet where supplies are kept. The service landings and closets are an important workspace because it is a main work area for many housekeeping employees. Housemen must make sure the area is free of garbage and extra items removed, such as used room service trays. These areas can be especially challenging because they are often small and narrow. Room attendants can get easily frustrated, not to mention potentially injured, when it is difficult to maneuver around things while carrying heavy linens and garbage. Food left lying around can attract pests which can then also migrate to the guestrooms. Spills on the floor must be mopped immediately to avoid any falls. Furthermore, guests who happen to be passing by as an employee who enters or exits these areas will not be impressed if they catch a glimpse of messy conditions, knowing that the linen on their bed and the terry in the bathroom are coming from there.

Conclusion

The sum effect of the BOH being well-maintained is good employee morale. All employees should be proud of where they work. From the time they enter the door until the time they leave, hospitality demands 100% from its employees. Arriving to a dirty workspace is like coming home from vacation to a messy home – it doesn't make one feel very motivated. Worse yet, the persistence of uncleanliness validates it. If a child never puts his toys away and is never corrected, he learns that it is ok to do so. So it goes in the workplace. If managers allow a messy hotel, the employees will adopt the same blasé attitude or even have anger, feeling that Management does not care. One reaps what one sows. Just as much as managers must serve the guests, they must serve the employees as well. Employees who feel cared for tend to pass that spirit along to the guests.

In a hotel, it ultimately does not matter who sees what parts of the hotel. All persons who enter the property for whatever reason are equally as important; therefore, all the areas those persons will traverse are equally important. Between everyone, that amounts to every square inch of the hotel. One must open the mind to not want any stone left unturned and to train the eyes to feel unsatisfied with that one door handle to the stairwell that does not look so bright or that small carpet stain in the housekeeping office. If so much attention is paid to the BOH, it gives the impression that the FOH must be even cleaner, and in most cases this holds true. But the manager's best mind and best eyes are not those of his or her own, but belong to the hotel's greatest asset: its employees. They must act in this capacity as well. Once this has been achieved, a manager has opened the door to success. ✧

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