

## Staying on the Quality Path

by Vicky Ramakka

It's the opening of the semester; faculty and staff are swapping stories of summer travels. The college president conducts the traditional convocation with notices and awards. Then the president recognizes the physical plant crew—everybody leaps to their feet, a standing ovation, the maintenance crew ducks their heads in embarrassment, but grin with pleasure. Is this a facilities manager's daydream? No, it's an annual tradition at San Juan College.

What does it take to gain the respect of an academic community? It takes the management skills combined with the service attitude that Steve Biernacki brings to his position. For Biernacki, the job is not taking care of buildings, it is creating a place where learning occurs. Now in his 15th year as physical plant director at this community college in northwest New Mexico, he supervises 68 staff and oversees new construction and facilities maintenance of more than 900,000 square feet.

"My goal is to never get a call about a problem with the facilities," says Biernacki. "The aim is to take care of situations before the customer becomes aware of it." He identifies his customers as faculty and staff who serve the more than 9,000 students per semester.

Biernacki's management techniques focus on providing excellent service to the college community. He relies on

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**Vicky Ramakka is director of university programs at San Juan College in Farmington, New Mexico; she can be reached at [ramakkav@sanjuancollege.edu](mailto:ramakkav@sanjuancollege.edu). This is her first article for Facilities Manager.**



proactive maintenance, continuous process improvement, and employee participation.

### Quality Is Contagious

As soon as he was hired, Biernacki set out to change attitudes. When a faculty member asked his staff for an extension cord, rather than reply, "can't do, there isn't a budget for that," Biernacki went out and bought 100 extension cords. He told staff to give them to anyone who asked. This changed attitudes. The requester was happy, and staff started receiving positive feedback from college employees.

Attending a conference that covered quality processes put Biernacki on the quality path. He recalls his excitement about learning quality processes, measuring how you are doing. "Wow, what a concept," he said, "I believe in it and continue to practice it."

Biernacki searches for continual improvement in processes. Suggestions usually come from his staff. At weekly meetings, Biernacki asks, "Is there anything that can help everybody here?" To prime the pump, he'll

cite earlier suggestions which have been implemented. These bottom-up ideas have included: a Tommy-lift for the truck, cordless tools, a Genie-lift to repair ceiling lights, an expanded yard for safer maneuvering of equipment, and built in-shop cabinets to store hardware items.

These weekly meetings help Biernacki lead the physical plant department toward team work and a service attitude. He likes to use a technique called "scripting." He may play the role of "the bad-tempered professor" and model how to maintain a professional demeanor, use questioning to get to the real problem, and use phrases which help employees communicate that the physical plant will do whatever is feasible to resolve the problem. Crew members are always instructed to ask, "Is there anything else I can help you with today?" This scripting gives crew members human relations tools to succeed in the college environment.

The physical plant uses computerized work orders and follows up with a Services Questionnaire to obtain feedback on whether work was performed satisfactorily. The nine-item survey asks the requestor to rate timeliness and quality of service. Department heads use ACT 1000 software to sort work requests and customer satisfaction surveys by type of job, by requesting department or by employee assigned the job. The department uses this documentation for planning, staff evaluation, and improving services.

### Agility

Biernacki believes in fixing a problem when it occurs—period. He says time explaining why you can't do something is time wasted. It's better to figure out how to solve the problem.



**Steve Biernacki with a sign for San Juan's Quality Control Hotline.**

The shop holds an inventory of hardware and tools valued in six figures. He keeps 100 door knobs of various styles on hand, because delivery can take weeks for those specialized items.

Day crew members carry mobile phones. If there's a spill somewhere or a broken railing, they're on it. Biernacki says he has 30 sets of trained eyes taking care of problems, or better yet, preventing them in the first place. Each full-time crew member has a credit card issued in his or her name. The night custodial team leader can go to Wal-Mart at 2:00 a.m. if he needs something to expedite work. If vendors deliver supplies at off hours, a crew member can pay for it then and there.

Big jobs call for the "Tiger Team." Biernacki's assistant director, Garry Smothers, a retired Army Installation Commander, drew on his experience mobilizing troops to create the Tiger Team system. When a Tiger Team alert goes out, it means finish up what you are doing and meet in a specified location in 30 minutes. At least a dozen people show up, with tools and fork lifts, from every department—grounds, maintenance, custodial. For planned or unexpected events, everybody pitches in and knows that the job will get done quickly.

Smothers claims, "The Tiger Team can do anything." Staff know that when their department is faced with a big job, other departments will be there for them. For example, when a tractor trailer load of paper arrives for the printing department, 960 cases at 40 pounds each are unloaded and placed inside in less than an hour. When heavy rainfall flooded a construction site, the alert went out for all hands to come with shovels. All hands means supervisors, too. Smothers recalls his cell phone ringing and the vice-president demanding to know what he was doing out there in the mud. Garry replied that, "A Tiger Team works best when the lead Tiger is there too."

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### **Good Service Fosters Excellence**

With its expectation of quality service and flawless facilities, the San Juan College physical plant has moved away from contracting out services. In his unassuming way, Biernacki confirms his high standards when he calmly says, "You lose something if you outsource. By not contracting out, you have control over quality of work and timing, you don't have to rely on outsiders' schedules."

Biernacki wants students and community members to have a sense of pride when they drive onto campus. He says that "Success draws success. The college has great community support. Their tax dollars are visible in the grounds and physical plant. First impressions are important. Visitors

first see the work of the grounds department, then they enter a building and notice that it is in tip-top shape due to the maintenance department. And when it comes time to visit a restroom, it is clean. Every department counts."

### **Building Competence**

Biernacki is a long-time member of APPA, and regularly attends professional conferences. He considers Don Mackel, a past president of APPA, as his mentor. Upon being hired at San Juan College, Biernacki visited Mackel, then physical plant director of the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He refers to Mackel as the "guru of preventive maintenance."



**San Juan College's assistant director, Garry Smothers**

Biernacki graduated from Denver Automotive Diesel College and holds licenses as a Journeyman Carpenter, Millwright, and Certified Welder. He also operated his own construction business. This background gives him the technical know how to supervise

both maintenance and new construction.

Biernacki is a certified Quality New Mexico Examiner. A career high for him was being part of the College Leadership team that won the Quality New Mexico Zia award, the first time it is was ever awarded to an academic institution.

### Setting a Standard

Biernacki believes that as a community college, San Juan College facilities maintenance should set a standard and be a model for the community. A recent initiative is converting expanses of grass to xeriscaped zones. "This is a significant cost savings," he says, "not only in water, but in manpower to mow and maintain lawns. Visitors get ideas for their own yards. A community college should project an image that this is how it should be in a dry climate."

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San Juan College President, Dr. Carol Spencer recognizes that the condition of the physical plant can either enhance or hinder the learning environment. She declares, "Our physical plant employees take great pride in being part of the educational process. Their pride is obvious in how they maintain our campus. Steve makes sure his employees know they are the ones who provide the framework for an education here."

The President's Mission Award went to Biernacki for his selfless service to the community. He also received the peer-to-peer Sun Award. Calling his staff a good team, Biernacki continually emphasizes they are "not just custodians" but individuals who provide an environment for students to get a quality education. "Graduation is hectic for us," he says, "but the staff sees this event as their accomplishment too." 🏆

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