

DESIGNING THE SUCCESSFUL GROUNDS ORGANIZATION

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Operational Guidelines
for Educational Facilities

Grounds

second edition



Grounds maintenance is conspicuous work. Doing it well requires preparation and organization, whether repairing a road, finishing concrete, scattering salt on icy steps, landscaping a new building, trimming trees, or refurbishing a bus stop. Our jobs are especially difficult because they take place under the watchful eyes of the public, many of whom are weekend gardeners and think they know the best way to do things. Few people, however, have a sustained interest in the art of managing people and directing resources to ensure that a campus is maintained safely and attractively.

But grounds managers do, and they find ways to be helpful and get things accomplished. Effective leaders know and appreciate those who do the work of the organization. “In the world according to great managers, the employee is the star. The manager is the agent,” wrote Buckingham & Coffman in *First, Break All the Rules*. Genuine cooperation results when supervisors encourage employees to identify and solve problems. Supervision through cooperation and empowerment requires a fair exchange of responsibilities and benefits so that all can share the fruits of sustained efforts.

There are probably several ways to organize departments and do this, but three are mostly commonly used.

ZONE MAINTENANCE

Most people take care of things better if they own them. For example, people who rent a house may not be too concerned about the impact that pets might have on carpet. Perhaps they move pictures often and are not bothered by all the holes in the walls, because the home is not theirs. Likewise, drivers of rental cars might not be as careful as they are with their own vehicles. Squeezing into a tight parking space is no problem. The ding in the door from the other guy might not be such a big concern.

Another observation is that people litter in public spaces, but they probably would not throw trash on the ground in their own yards. People tend to care more about things if they are personally responsible for them. For example, a grounds worker who operates the same mower every day will likely take better care of it. The tires are equally inflated. The blades are changed as needed and the moving parts get greased every day. The condition of a piece of equipment can often reveal the level of attention to detail and tell supervisors a lot about the work habits of the operator. On the other hand, the problem of poorly maintained equipment can develop if mowers or dump trucks, for example, are operated

by different people every day. No one knows who scraped the fender, lost the fire extinguisher, or forgot to check the oil.

As with equipment, a supervisor and crew with responsibility for a specific campus area can nurture a sense of ownership and foster teamwork. Often, people are more interested in their jobs if they have their own areas to take care of. They take pride in improvements made over time and feel good about their contributions. They notice changes from one day to the next, are mindful of unfinished details that must be attended to, and pitch in to help one another. A zone approach to deployment of personnel can also encourage friendly competition.

People like to be the best. They like to win. Certainly, doing as well as or better than peers is important to many of us. Unlike some kinds of work, landscape maintenance is not abstract. Our work is conspicuous, and we can see what has been accomplished at the end of the day. Noticing which landscaped areas look better than others is easy. Peer pressure can be a positive factor if it raises the level of interest and pride that people have in their work. If productivity is increased and the level of grounds maintenance improves, good things are happening.

We are in the service business, and the general public, campus employees, students, and faculty are our customers. It's important for our customers to see us occasionally, and zone maintenance allows this to happen more frequently since the same people are usually in the same areas every day. As a consequence, we can create a favorable impression for our organization when a customer approaches a lead worker or supervisor with a question or request and finds someone who can provide accurate information or make a decision. The level of customer satisfaction increases when an individual's concern is regarded as important enough to be acted on quickly.

Another positive aspect of zone maintenance is that workers often see the same people every day. As people come to campus in the morning or go about their business throughout the day, they often have routines. They usually arrive to work at the same time each day; probably park in the same location; walk, bike, or jog the same routes; and work in the same building. These situations allow grounds maintenance personnel to have occasional contact with people and develop relationships. This is important because the opportunity to establish rapport, show an interest in the needs of others, and provide timely service is a good situation worth nurturing.

A zone approach to maintenance of campus grounds assigns a specific supervisor and a specific crew to a particular area, and they perform all the necessary tasks in it. Therefore, it is important to develop expertise in several skills so that individuals are qualified to do any job on any team, such as the mowing crew, irrigation crew, tree crew, pruning crew, or horticultural team.

When employees have the skills necessary to perform many different tasks, the whole organization benefits because people can solve any problem, meet any challenge, and fill any void—and they know it.

Confidence and can-do attitudes are the logical outcome. This fosters a sense of ownership, ensures continuity, increases job satisfaction, facilitates supervision of jobs, and allows people to demonstrate a sustained commitment toward making the campus a better place. So, providing opportunities and training that increase abilities and create jacks-of-all-trades is good for individuals and the organizations in which they work, especially when zone maintenance is the preferred way to organize the workforce.

The zone approach also offers some potential challenges as well. There may be a tendency for people to create boundaries and the possibility that staff members will reach beyond the beneficial friendly competition and create silos or lose a sense of teamwork with the larger grounds organization. Multiple crews may require additional equipment to accommodate their competing schedules, as weather and horticultural requirements often mean everyone will want to use the same piece of equipment at the same time. New groundskeepers in the zone-based organization may require more training to become proficient in their positions. Consequently, the zone approach is more frequently used on campuses that cover larger geographic areas and have larger staff and more equipment resources.

BROADCAST MAINTENANCE

Having the same crew responsible for the same area of campus every day is also an effective approach to grounds maintenance. The resulting routines and familiarity are good, but so is variety. Doing the same tasks at the same location every day can get physically and mentally tiring. It's refreshing to see and do other things and take on different opportunities and challenges. Too much of the same thing saps energy, dulls attitudes, lowers productivity, and causes a drain on the brain.

Over time we adapt to the sights, sounds, and smells that constantly surround us. Eventually awareness fades, and the constants in our environment become much less noticeable. For example, enter an air-conditioned building on a sultry summer day and a refreshing breeze of cool air greets you. But, within ten seconds or ten strides down the hallway, you probably don't notice it anymore. The same thing happens with beaches, mountains, sunrises, pay raises, fancy cars, life in general, and, unfortunately, with people. We get too used to things. I teach an undergraduate class each semester, and I recently asked one of my students how the university could serve them better. A young lady replied, "Surprise us. We're just in our routines every day and we need something different to get interested in; everybody does."

In the world of facilities management, surprises are generally not something we want. Nonetheless, a change of pace is good, and a broadcast approach to grounds maintenance can provide this somewhat by providing work settings that differ daily or change several times throughout a workweek. For this reason and others, a broadcast approach to campus maintenance works well, because people work in different areas of campus each day. This is helpful because we all like a little difference in our days, whether at work or at home.

A broadcast approach uses teams. For example, the mowing team performs all the mowing in a discrete area and then moves on to another one. The pruning team, irrigation team, and other teams function in this manner also. There is an advantage in having crews of specifically trained people move about campus and do all of a certain type of work. It is common for a mowing team, herbicide crew, or tree crew to handle all needs of these types, rather than have separate crews for each area. This broadcast approach avoids duplication, efficiently uses labor and equipment resources, nurtures

cooperation, and allows personnel to respond to problems in a timely manner. Training time for replacement employees is minimal, and people can become highly specialized and effective in their jobs.

The broadcast approach has its potential challenges as well. Once the task becomes too routine, attention wanders and the quality of work tends to slip. For the same reasons, monotony is a real challenge, and employee job satisfaction can diminish over time. While people may take ownership of their task or individual effort, there is less ownership for the appearance of the whole area and less pride in their job, their institution, and potentially themselves.

A COMBINED APPROACH

Another approach to organizing campus grounds maintenance is a combination of assignments in which crews have responsibility for specific areas, yet their efforts are augmented by crews of specialists that move about campus. This approach allows a unified workforce to handle peak demands, such



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as mowing during the rainy season or snow removal during winter months. The appropriate approach to maintenance for any campus and the best methods to be used will vary from one geographical location to another. Also, amount of rainfall, exposure to the sun, soil condition, topography, climate, intended and unintended uses, expectations, and resources all help determine maintenance priorities and regimens. Matching the best maintenance approach to landscaped sites is the essence of effective grounds management.

SUMMARY

The most important component of any service organization is people. This is especially true of grounds management, because effective maintenance is dependent on good supervision and knowledgeable people. The grounds management function, therefore, must have personnel who are competent and committed. They must fully understand the scope of their duties and responsibilities and know the mission of the entire

organization. People can do things better when they have opportunities to do the many different and important tasks necessary to maintain campus grounds. We need people who have seen the big picture.

People require less supervision as they become more capable and more self-sufficient, more responsible, more confident, and better able to contribute to the mission. A happy consequence of being more proficient and having more qualifications is that employees are more motivated and qualified for other job opportunities. In the long run, this is good for people and good for the organization, because when there are increased chances for upward mobility, people are more hopeful, more motivated, and more productive. ☺

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