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Training?

We don't need no stinking training!

By Gregory P. Hawkins and Claude T. Hawkins

Ever notice that "deer caught in the headlights of a fast-approaching truck" look on the faces of the new employees at your self-storage business? Sure, they were excellent employees at their last position, but this is their first day with your organization.

Manager, handyman or office worker, they may possess marvelous skills and years of experience. But it's all just promises and potential until you integrate them as productive members of your team. Your new employees must become comfortable with the mechanics of your specific operation before they will produce the results you expect.

Sink or Swim--and Good Luck

There are two basic methods for training new personnel. The first and most popular is the "sink or swim" school of training. It consists of a supervisor leading the new employee to a large swimming pool. "We are very impressed with your credentials," the supervisor says. "Ask anyone if you have questions." Then the supervisor pushes the new employee into the deep end of the pool. The new employee--who doesn't want to look foolish--makes a valiant effort to hold any frantic splashing to a minimum.

This method of training is effective--eventually. Taking the plunge and making mistakes is a good teacher. Most of your new people will ultimately learn their jobs and settle into the company rhythm. However, can your business afford for each new employee to make an average of three mistakes during every step of the learning process?

Large companies employ a dedicated training staff, allowing new employees to make their "three mistakes" in a classroom setting. This is impractical for self-storage operations. Chances are good that you offer some sort of orientation and maybe a handbook. Still, the day-to-day reality for most self-storage businesses is

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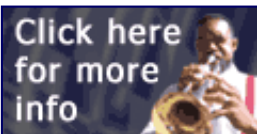
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lean and mean. The need is now, and resources do not allow the time or money for elaborate training programs.

Consider a marriage of the two strategies. This merge of training tactics is less likely to soak up limited resources. Also, it will provide personal flotation devices when a multitude of new processes and procedures threaten to engulf your new employees.

Basic Building Blocks

Reference material is the foundation of proper training. Self-storage operators face challenges in this regard that many other businesses rarely consider. When your new employees are confused and need help, they are often too far away to ask someone face to face. Good reference material can make the difference between success and frustration.

Nothing is more fundamental than names and phone numbers. Assign an experienced employee to compile a list of names and phone numbers of the people and organizations important to the smooth operation of your business. This should be a short list, no more than three printed pages. This abridged contact list is not a customer list, per se. Include suppliers, the people who fix equipment beyond the skills of your crew, emergency numbers, even the people who stock your vending machines. Include company personnel in a separate section.

Especially during the first few weeks, your new employee will discover a need to contact someone and not know who to call or how. They will waste a few minutes considering the problem, a few more minutes deciding who to call, a few more minutes ... you see where this is heading. You can short-circuit the entire scenario with a simple list of frequent contacts.

Include a short paragraph explaining why each person on the list is valuable to your company. Note the services and/or products this person provides, as well as what expectations they might have of your company. This transforms what began as a phone book into a superb resource and reference tool, not only for your new employees, but your entire staff. This project probably requires less than two hours.

Paper Training Your New Employee

Are there other areas where you can provide written training material for your new hires? Consider training sheets to summarize important procedures and processes. Most of your business procedures are fairly simple, at least to you. Still, your new employees must learn dozens of procedures and hundreds of simple steps. In congregate, this is intimidating. The things they learn today will begin to crowd what they learned yesterday. A good training sheet allows for efficient instruction and quick review.

Be warned that there exists a hard truth about training sheets: Many are poorly constructed and confusing. Others are nearly worthless. These things only work if you are serious about developing training sheets that are functional and effective. A good training sheet--with emphasis on the word "good"--must clearly explain a specific process in such a way that your new employees can successfully complete the process by themselves. Vague explanations, partial explanations and outdated information spawn frustration rather than resolve it.

In addition, a good training sheet must be short and to the point. It should consist of one page and one page only. Human nature is human nature. Your new employees will not take the time to understand anything longer. An elaborate explanation of some basic process that rambles in detail for several pages will prove more detrimental than beneficial. Break down complicated processes into component parts that fit onto a single sheet.

Now for the good news. Most training sheets take less than 15 minutes to prepare. And the format is simple. Describe step one of the process, then step two, then step three. Add a few bulleted explanations under each step and you are finished. Notwithstanding the previous warning about poorly written training sheets, keep in mind that a training sheet is nothing more than a basic outline with brief descriptions, not a master's thesis.

The Employee Handbook

Worksheets are dynamic because they train your new employees on specific processes. They help them to move forward. The company handbook is more static because it is essentially a rule book, and rules seldom change. From your perspective, rules have a positive impact on your business. Unfortunately, some employees will always see rules as something to avoid or work around. Your new employees will be eager to follow the rules until a more experienced employee points to the handbook and says, "Don't worry too much about all that stuff."

Consider splitting your handbook into two books. The first should contain general information such as what to do in an emergency, a list of paid holidays, how your payroll system works, etc. The second book should contain the company rules.

No one will attack the information in the first book, which you should call "The Handbook." While it contains information essential to the smooth operation of your business, it is not threatening to your employees. But some employees will always test the rules. By isolating the rules into a separate "Rule Book," you essentially draw a line in the sand. In effect, you are saying, "Cross this line at your own peril."

The Human Touch

Reference material is great, as far as it goes. But sometimes the hand of a more experienced employee on the shoulder of a new employee makes all the difference. In all likelihood, you generally appoint someone to shepherd new employees for the first few days and then function as an advisor until they become familiar with their job assignments. This is excellent. The combination of personal instruction coupled with a training sheet for review is powerful. In this way, you secure many benefits of a training staff without the expense.

The Metaphysics of Good Training

In truth, proper training produces immediate and discernible results. Yet training is also a soft science with results best measured by the behavior of your new people. When a new employee clearly understands you will support his transition to your team with proper training, he broadcasts an almost telepathic message that says, "Yes, I am new. But I am supported by professionals. So we can both relax and enjoy the experience."

The Treasure of Sierra Madre

This article takes its inspiration from the words of Alonso Bedoya to Humphrey Bogart in the 1948 classic movie *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*. The bandits, masquerading as law-enforcement officers, demonstrate contempt for the potential consequences of their actions when they declare, "Badges? We ain't got no badges. We don't need no [stinking] badges." You cannot afford to ignore the negative consequences of shoot-from-the-hip training. Proper training will help to integrate your new employees into your self-storage operation with efficiency and effectiveness.

Gregory P. Hawkins is a practicing attorney with more than 15 years of litigation and general-practice experience, as well as an adjunct professor at George Wythe College. Mr. Hawkins recently ran for the U.S. Senate in Utah, missing the opportunity for a primary runoff by 54 votes. He remains politically active.

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