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## **PERSONNEL ROLE IN SANITATION**

by

Richard Meehan

For the past twenty years, I have trained personnel in cleaning methods and provided sanitary supplies for all types of commercial and industrial situations from my family-owned distributorship, Marko, Inc., Sanitary and Janitorial Supply, in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Of the variety of customers I've dealt with, food processors are unquestionably the most plagued by cleaning challenges, rivaled only by medical facilities. To bandy phrases like *Hazardous Analysis and Critical Control Plans*, *cross-contamination*, *Escherichia coli* and *Salmonella enteritidis*, and to keep up with myriad government regulations enacted to reduce food-borne illnesses, practically requires a doctorate in sanitation. Yet, the greatest challenge for food facility operators is to insure that all employees adhere to proper sanitation procedures. Although managers are ultimately responsible for facility cleanliness, it is individual workers that create the greatest boon—or detriment—to food processing safety.

No one wants to work harder than necessary; hence, we as individuals tend to do our own thing when it comes to cleaning. Each of us believes we know the secret to reducing elbow grease while still adequately completing the task. This attitude is a problem in food handling facilities, from corner grills to mega-packagers, since some of our creative, time-saving methods are not particularly hygienic, and others are downright dangerous. For example, two employees of a major restaurant franchise once mixed chlorine bleach with acid-based tile cleaner to make a stronger product for scrubbing grout. It became so strong in fact, that the chlorine fumes released into the air from the chemical reaction between the two products cleared the restaurant during a busy lunchtime. No one was injured, although the poisonous chlorine gas caused quite a bit of hacking and coughing. The franchise was lucky not to be sued and fortunate that the incident did not get reported in the local media; the employees only desired to save some labor while cleaning the kitchen floors, not harm anyone. Although the franchise involved in this incident must remain nameless, mistakes like this unfortunately happen all the time, albeit on a lesser scale.

Vacationing recently, I witnessed another appalling sanitation gaff at a world class Italian restaurant. I sat at a counter designed to afford me a view of the culinary talent (chefs), while eating a carefully prepared five star meal. Between mouthfuls of lasagna, I was entertained by two such chefs—one making salads, the other chopping raw chicken. About mid-meal, the salad preparer asked the chicken chopper to watch his station while he took a quick break. Moments later, a Caesar salad order came through and the chicken chopper, with greasy latex-gloved hands, laid down his cleaver and delved into the fresh Romaine lettuce. A beautifully presented salad was whisked down the chef line, from gloved fingers to gloved fingers. About then, another chef hollered down the line to ask the chicken chopper to change out the fry vats, so he

grabbed the handles of the vat trays and pulled them from the oil, then dropped in fresh trays too. By the time I choked down the rest of my meal, a single person had contaminated all thirteen chefs with raw chicken juice, and endangered every other restaurant patron that night. Of course, there were two simple solutions to the problem: have the raw chicken chef change gloves before handling other items and move him to a more isolated area (separate processes). If cross-contamination can happen in a five star restaurant, it can happen anywhere!

Costly and stringent USDA, FDA and OSHA guidelines now encumber all food handlers in an attempt to limit cross-contamination of food processes, control the spread of food-borne illnesses and protect employees and customers from dangerous situations. Is it surprising that these regulations were designed to govern *individual* employee sanitation methods? Probably not; however, the laws squarely place the responsibility of compliance on the employer—not the employee. This means employers must implement employee training sessions, purchase expensive cleaning materials, and monitor sanitation processes. According to Roy C. Getz, senior vice president and chief marketing officer for Damon's Grill International, a 140 location casual sports/ribs/chicken dining experience, "Cleanliness is directly related to profits. If a cross-contamination occurs, it means dollars in fines and cleanups, not to mention lawsuits." Should employees ignore their training, all monetary investments in sanitation are wasted; further, these employees become liabilities.

By now, all food handlers should be familiar with the concept of *zone cleaning*, or the dividing of process areas within a food facility to limit the possibility of cross-contamination from one area to another. Zone cleaning is an excellent way to increase the level of sanitation throughout a facility and hold costs down, yet the entire success of a zone program rests on the

shoulders of individuals. In brief, all food processors attempt to control cross-contamination and the spread of food-borne bacteria by:

- Separating all processes (poultry processing from fish, bakery floor cleaning from restroom cleaning, etc.)
- Using temperature to control bacteria (cooling and heating of surfaces and foods)
- Preparing a battle plan in case of contamination (HACCP).

Thick books have been written on each of these subjects. While managers must be familiar with every point, employees need to be taught proper cleaning procedures to meet the sanitation requirements. “Pride is the key factor in the cleanliness of any facility. Employees are more likely to do a better job of cleaning if they have pride in their work. They are more likely to have pride in their work if managers afford them the necessary training, equipment and chemicals for the tasks so they don’t have to work as hard to achieve good results.” said Dan Osborn, region manager for Nilfisk Advance, Inc., a global manufacturer of floor care equipment.

Every time I’ve smelled odor from the restroom wafting across my plate, every time I’ve watched a waitress use a filthy dishrag to wipe a table, every time I’ve found a hair or grit in what I was eating, I’ve known full well that I was taking a chance on being poisoned by some food or chemical contaminate, and that somewhere behind the scenes someone was not being very careful with my health. Getz, with more than twenty years of restaurant know-how, believes, “Sanitation is just as critical as the proper serving of hot foods, but often times [restaurant] operators do not place them at the same level of importance.” One of my own customers, a good old Southern “Fish Camp” operator, once told me that if a restaurant is spotless, “...the food ain’t no good!” I surely hope his philosophy is wrong, though I love his Saturday night seafood buffet.

So, what can the individual do to help maintain high sanitation levels in food processing facilities? There is a short list of factors in the equation for cleanliness, each a topic in itself:

- Be diligent.
- Follow instructions.
- Don't take shortcuts.
- Learn proper cleaning methods.
- Be thorough.
- Take pride in you work.
- Use common sense.

Whether you're the overseer or the bloke doing the hands-on cleaning, a bit of common sense is definitely a prerequisite to implementing a sanitation plan (which should address every step of the equation above.) Trouble comes when laymen deviate from the list on the premise of reducing elbow-grease. Now don't get me wrong, I believe in creativity as much as anyone, but unless you have professional knowledge of the effect your change will have, it is best to simply follow the plan. Let a professional come up with further labor-reducing, cost-saving methods.

Diligence is next to cleanliness as cleanliness is next to godliness. This sounds like an axiom to me. If every employee could be taught this one trait, all other details would resolve themselves. Diligence means awareness; diligence is caring. Every food facility employee needs this trait above all others. Managers should remove those who do not adhere to this concept, for this is the one trait that passes inspections and staves off fines and lawsuits.

Those who follow instructions are a blessing. They never mix cleaning chemicals in the wrong proportions, always allow proper dwell time for disinfectants, never use dirty equipment

to attempt sanitization routines, and handle the details of the sanitation process. Step-by-step, they work until the proper conclusion—total sanitation—has been reached.

It is human nature to look for the easiest way out of problems, and to some, work is a problem. A good sanitation employee resists this instinct, however. Times uncounted I have witnessed restaurant employees speed through the evening cleanup routine so they can close early. Rushing the sanitation process is like lighting a fuse on dynamite, though. Managers that allow this sort of behavior should beware. Too many bugs require plenty of soak time in disinfectant to be killed. Dirty mops, squeegees, brushes and other tools of the trade do nothing but spread germs. Part of every closing procedure should include plenty of time for not just area cleaning, but equipment cleaning. Besides, if bad sanitization habits appear near closing time, then most likely they lurk throughout the day too.

Everyone knows the old saw, “You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink.” That’s the way individuals are. No matter how much training occurs, no matter what level of cleaning products are provided to attain a certain level of cleanliness, an individual who isn’t willing to learn the material is a waste of time and money. Daily, I meet cleaning personnel who believe they know everything about their trade. They are quite willing to tell me I don’t have a clue about how to clean, although I’ve been involved with my family janitorial supply business since 1968. Food processors need to remove this type of employee from their books in self-defense.

While diligence is married to cleanliness, thoroughness is a kissing cousin. Slings a mop over the floor does not mean the floor is getting clean. There are methods to mopping just as there are to solving algebraic equations. In fact, there are methods to every aspect of cleaning. The primary rule is to pay attention to details. [For instance, instead of simply ramming a mop

into a corner (which fills the corner with dirty water), use a deck brush to scrub the corner, then dry it with a rag or sponge.] This is why professional sanitation instruction for caring employees would be cost effective in the long run. Anytime cleanliness levels are achieved and maintained, the company saves dollars, so kiss those employees with a track record of being thorough.

If all of the factors in the cleanliness equation are tallied, overall sanitation will be achieved. Money will be saved. Clientele will be protected from nasty food organisms. The greatest challenge of food facility operators—insuring employees follow sanitation plans to their safe conclusions on a daily basis—will be surmounted. Individuals will become a positive influence in the overall appearance, safety and cost-consciousness of their food handling employer. It doesn't take a doctorate in sanitation, only pride in doing a thorough job.

### **SIDEBAR: TOP FIFTEEN CROSS-CONTAMINATION SINS**

Laziness eats at the root of all sanitation routines. Like a demon, it subverts an otherwise passably clean facility by introducing tiny increments of slackness into cleaning procedures. Employees or managers that are unwilling to do what it takes to minimize the chance of food-borne illness disasters should not be in the food industry; therefore, excise them if they cannot be converted to diligence. Here's a list of top sins leading to contamination of food areas:

1. Not washing hands thoroughly with E2 antibacterial soap.
2. Forgetting to use gloves or change gloves as needed.

3. Wearing an apron into a restroom and dropping it on the floor.
4. Not wearing hairnets, or if wearing, not covering head thoroughly.
5. Not labeling squirt bottles of chemicals properly.
6. Mixing different chemicals together expecting better results.
7. Mixing tools across zones and/or using dirty tools.
8. Using filthy cleaning equipment (mops, brushes, etc.)
9. Neglecting to change out the mop water as needed.
10. Improperly diluting cleaners and disinfectants so as to render them useless.
11. Skipping sanitation procedures to save labor.
12. Leaving the door of the refrigerator ajar so the temperature fluctuates too much.
13. Not designating specific equipment by color-coding, or not having enough equipment in stock to allow proper coding (chopping blocks, cleavers, brushes, etc.)
14. Allowing sick employees to work in food prep areas.
15. Using the wrong tool or chemical for the job.

Many other gaffs could be listed here, but what's the point? Mistakes like these should not be tolerated in food establishments, yet they are. Obviously, that's the reason for so much government intrusion into the safe operation of these facilities. Even with tough commandments carrying sizable punishments for transgressions, food processors still manage to slip by on cleanliness inspections. However, too much is at stake. Food handlers must excise the Demon of Laziness to avoid lawsuits and skip bad publicity. Eliminate these fifteen major sins in your food facility to keep yourself in business!