How do you define clean?
What is an acceptable quality level?

By: Jim Peduto, Esq., CBSE

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The question our clients ask more frequently than any other question is, "What is the definition of clean?"

It should be an easy question to answer since the dictionary definitions are pretty straightforward: Clean: free from dirt, marks or stains.

However, as H.L. Mencken famously said, "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong."

Proper Understanding

Properly understood, defining "clean" is really a question of quality. Specifically, "What is an acceptable quality level?"

Philip Crosby, a leading contributor to management theory and quality management practice defined quality as "conformance to requirements, not as 'goodness.'"

This means being able to develop a precise definition of what the customer wants and can pay for.

In a perfect world, all customers would see the value of a perfectly clean building and view the associated cost as an investment.

The realities of the marketplace mean that there are tradeoffs.

Thus, it is possible to conform to the customer's requirements without delivering a perfectly "clean" building.

Two-pronged Approach

ISSA's Cleaning Industry Management Standard (CIMS) echoes Crosby's philosophy.

Section 1.1.1 states: "There shall be a site-specific scope of work or performance outcome describing cleaning service requirements."

Simply put, there are two things cleaning organizations need to do to achieve "quality."

First, define customers' requirements; and, second, validate conformance to those requirements.

Organizations must regularly measure themselves on their success in conformance to customer requirements.

Surveys, inspections, counting complaints and customer evaluations are some of the tools that CIMS identifies.

Measurement is essential because it is the only way for an organization to know if it is meeting the customer's expectations and therefore, achieving an acceptable quality level.

To help organizations define clean, conform to that definition and then confirm conformance through measurement.

I have developed the following checklist:

■ Agree on the scope of work or performance outcome. Work together with individual customers to reach an agreement on a scope of work or performance outcome. Identify all surfaces and attributes that need to be cleaned in each area of each building. If you are using a traditional scope of work, identify how frequently they will be cleaned. If it is a performance contract, define what each area should look like after it has been cleaned.

■ Prioritize areas or surfaces in order of importance and weigh them accordingly. If the customer views certain areas or surfaces as more important than others, use a weighting system to prioritize tasks. It is common for areas, such as restrooms, lobbies and other high traffic areas, to be given greater weight. Healthcare facilities would consider patient rooms to be a high priority area. Engage your customers to help identify the level of importance for each area that will be cleaned. Based on the level of importance, assign a rate or a weighting score for each task. There are many ways to do this and most quality assurance programs provide for weighting.

■ Assess each item/surface on a pass/fail or yes/no basis. Simple "yes" and "no" answers produce the most consistent measurements and can help determine whether or not each task was performed. A "yes" is a pass and a "no" is a fail. So, for example, if an area has 10 surfaces or items to be cleaned and nine pass that area gets a score of 90. Then, weigh that score accordingly depending on the importance of that area.

■ Repeat steps 1-3 for every area tasked to clean. The building's quality score is the composite of each area's score and each area's score is the composite of all tasks/results that make up the area. The whole is truly the sum of its parts.

The principles of CIMS are the starting point in building the framework for defining "clean" and setting an acceptable quality level. Ultimately, our customers set the requirements in each facility. By defining expectations and measuring performance, cleaning organizations can deliver the quality that customers expect and build long-term relationships. *CM*

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