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Clean state of mind

2/25/2015 - by Joe Stout

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Joe Stout

Sanitation is a word that can take on different meanings, depending on who uses it. It could be understood differently in speaking or writing it in a document. For some, it means trash or the process of collecting trash, as in sanitation workers in the Sanitation Department in New York City.

For others in different parts of the world, instead of using the word restroom or bathroom, they use sanitation room. Even with our company, which is called Commercial Food Sanitation, we get calls to bid for the collection of trash, which we respectfully decline. As a result, many people in the food industry hesitate to say they work in "sanitation."

In the food industry, sanitation means "the formulation and application of scientific methods designed to protect public health in food processing, storage and handling facilities." This is the definition that I associate with and am proud to be part of. The pride comes from what the function does and the value it generates. Without this work/activity, food would not be guaranteed as safe, and manufacturing plants would not be considered sanitary environments. Food sanitation is actually a disciplined process of transforming unclean to clean. This takes a science-based approach that without it causes a process to be ineffective and inefficient and a facility to be considered unsanitary. In this case, as defined in regulations, a food that is processed, stored or held in an unsanitary environment is considered to be adulterated.

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Transforming unclean to clean is the most exciting aspect of food sanitation. When I first started in sanitation as a supervisor, I was disappointed in what condition production left the plant for sanitation to clean. Often, product lay on the floor, housekeeping was not tended to and there was a general lack of order. Unfortunately, bad habits and practices were hard to break. As a result, our sanitation team had to focus on change via continuous improvement.

My granddaughter once came home from preschool with a saying from her teachers that goes like this: “You get what you get, don’t throw a fit, life is not always fair — deal with it.” In the beginning, the best way I could deal with it was to have a positive attitude and build up the team to become experts on cleaning and continuous improvement. Our goal: transform the facility and equipment to cleanliness and order prior to the end of the shift. We rose to the challenge, impressing operations and plant management. Once we earned credibility, and we were able to influence operations on second shift to leave the lines in respectable condition. We made a difference. This was motivational to us as a team and to the entire plant.

Back then, the focus on food safety involved control of foreign material and pest control. There was limited emphasis on allergens or pathogen control. Today, the industry is intensely focused on these factors and many other areas involving food safety, enhancing the value of sanitation effectiveness and efficiency.

Transforming a food facility from unclean to clean is not just the sanitation department’s responsibility. Rather, maintenance, production, human resources and quality assurance all own a piece of the transformation. Without a management team approach and correct sanitation management — either from a scientific, program management, staffing or operational perspective — the facility and equipment following sanitation might still be considered unclean, even after sanitation.

There is a saying in food sanitation that goes back many years: “Clean is clean, and there is no in between.” If you think your plant is sometimes a “Tweener,” 2015 is a good year to deal with it and move away from the unclean status.

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