Rotation program builds teamwork in Building Services

If you’ve never had the pleasure of cleaning up after a few thousand dorm-dwelling college students, building services director Chris Hatfield says you’re in good company. Two years ago, as many as two thirds of Notre Dame’s 200-plus custodians hadn’t either. So they didn’t know firsthand what it was like.

“People who worked the night shift – in academic or administrative buildings – thought the day shift [in residence halls] had it easy,” says Hatfield.

The night shift had a point. They had to cover more ground – 35,000 square feet of academic and administrative space each night, compared to 25,000 square feet of residence halls serviced by the well-staffed day shift. Because the two shifts rarely even cross paths in the parking lot, it’s no surprise their differing perspectives dusted up a few misunderstandings.

Hatfield just didn’t realize how many.

“Effectiveness,” he says, categorizing the main trouble spot identified in the division’s 2012 ND Voice results. “The efficiency question in particular, that was our most challenging score. We noticed a lot of our employees felt our department didn’t operate efficiently.”

A volunteer “ND Voice Council” was formed to review the survey data. After investigating, the Council reported that many employees felt the staffing wasn’t fairly distributed among the division’s 13 teams and four shifts. “We would hear from supervisors that some employees would want to switch shifts, or how some teams would be skeptical of other teams’ work,” says Hatfield. “Our supervisors were always willing to help each other out,” but in the end, Hatfield learned, “there was a ‘grass is greener’ mentality” that was tarnishing the division’s morale.

To polish up their teamwork and understanding, the division started a rotation program. Several of the division’s 13 supervisors participated, swapping shifts for a week at a time to work in a different area. “They got to walk in each others’ shoes,” Hatfield explains, “see how the other half lives, and get a better understanding of the challenges each shift faces.”

Did it help? Participants say yes. “They said, ‘wow, I didn’t know how different it was, how many other challenges they have to deal with’ and the like,” Hatfield says. “It has gone a long way to help everyone understand that we are part of one team, that everybody is treated the same regardless of your shift.” The rotation experience has since become a regular feature of the division’s orientation training for new hires.

While their increased appreciation for coworkers may be recent, there is one respect in which the division’s supervisors and exempt employees have always been on the same page: their ND Voice participation rate is consistently 100%. They’ve still managed to make a good thing better, though. “We used to have separate ND Voice Councils - one for day shift and one for night shift,” Hatfield says. But no longer. “Now we have one Council that works together.”

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