

MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT: PREPARE TO WIN



HR experts weigh in on the need for discipline, skills building, testing, education and more for rising executives

By Jack Morgan

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the mettle of linen, uniform and facility services companies and their management teams in ways unlike anything in living memory. Yet, most companies not only haven't thrown in the towel (pardon the pun), they've doubled down and are seeking not only to survive but to thrive in 2020 and beyond. To do that, many are "sharpening their swords" at a time when business is beginning to recover. This drive for self-improvement includes a wide range of initiatives aimed at strengthening key managers through various forms of training and hands-on experience. Several leading consultants and training professionals that we contacted applauded these moves. They urged laundry

executives to continue them as critical to reviving growth.

Bruce Hodes, a Chicago-based consultant, says he's seen a stark contrast among companies that have handled the crisis well and others that haven't. Specifically, companies that have provided a well-ordered environment and trained their managers for the unexpected, have weathered the storm the best, he says. "What I saw is the companies that were disciplined, that did do planning, that were used to working cross-departmentally, did much better than the companies that were not disciplined," Hodes says. "The companies that were set up to work from home and had technology platforms....The people were trained; they did much better. And the companies that didn't have that, it was a train wreck."

PREP: PANDEMICS, PEOPLE

Few would argue that training and preparation are helpful for enhancing the skills of managers. These efforts prepare them to protect and grow their businesses

either during a crisis like COVID-19 or in less-troubled times. But a key question remains: How much *outside training* is necessary as opposed to the in-house variety to prepare management teams for success?

The answers will vary significantly, depending on the size and type of company you're taking about, says Donald Maida, senior consultant with TBR Associates, a Tingle subsidiary based in Saddlebrook, NJ. Upper-level managers at the national companies typically will have completed advanced university degree programs, such as a master of business administration (MBA). These companies also conduct extensive in-house training, but Maida says he's seen a recent increase in interest by them in TRSA training programs such as the Executive Management Institute (EMI) and Professional Management Institute (PMI), as well. "These companies have been trending more to going to EMI in the last couple of years," he says. "This indicates to me that the EMI and PMI programs actually help them advance more candidates quickly." One factor in this shift says

“THE WILL TO WIN IS NOT NEARLY SO IMPORTANT AS THE WILL TO PREPARE TO WIN.”

—VINCE LOMBARDI, HALL OF FAME FOOTBALL COACH FOR THE GREEN BAY PACKERS AND WASHINGTON REDSKINS. HIS TEAMS WON FIVE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS, INCLUDING THE FIRST TWO SUPER BOWLS.

Maida, may be that as an older generation of managers retire, newer managers can benefit from outside training to get them up to speed faster in order to meet today's operational challenges. (see related story, pg. 34) “There has been an attrition of older, more hands-on knowledge managers in recent years,” he says.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in March and its recent resurgence in the southern and western U.S. likely has caused top leaders at textile service companies large and small to realize that outside training can help them cope with unpredictable “black swan”-type events that require broad-based skills in crisis management. “The current pandemic has changed the way in which we work and live our lives,” says H. Kent Baker, a university professor of finance at American University and the longtime dean and Year I instructor at EMI. “Leaders and managers need to be able to manage change—including emergencies and crises. We all face change—both little and big changes—every day. We’ve developed an array of coping mechanisms to deal with change, mainly through our personal interactions and experience on and off the job. However, no one’s toolkit is truly full. Additional training can provide new perspectives and techniques for handling emergencies and crises to become more effective.”

Maggan Hamilton, human resource business partner for AlSCO Linen and Uniform Rental Services, Salt Lake City, seconded Baker’s call for enhanced training, saying “The COVID-19 crisis has revealed a critical need for additional training to deal with emergency management.” She adds that, “Many companies

are feeling exposed after discovering that they had inadequate resources in place to handle a pandemic. Now, we all must get back to work by ensuring that when the next crisis occurs, we will be ready with a comprehensive plan that reduces the potential impacts on business and the individuals we employ.”

As if the pandemic wasn’t enough, U.S. operators—especially those in cities such as Seattle and Minneapolis—also have had to confront civil unrest following the death of George Floyd while in the custody of the Minneapolis police. This incident on May 25 set off a series of demonstrations and occasional rioting that has threatened to disrupt laundry operations, while putting employees and customers at risk. Given the diverse nature of many linen, uniform and facility services companies’ staffs and the communities they serve, the recent unrest has underscored the need for training to enhance awareness of cultural and racial differences and their impact on business operations. Eric Kurjan, president of Six Disciplines Consulting Services, Findlay, OH, says the need for the training of managers in this area will hinge in part on their personal backgrounds. “I think some of that depends on where that leader came from. Did he or she come from an environment where they had diverse cultures and individuals on a workforce, and how did they manage in that environment? If they don’t have any experience in that at all, then obviously they need experience as to how to be respectful of the cultures that those individuals bring to the organization.” Kurjan added that diversity training should in no way negate a company’s own culture. However, an improved understanding

of diversity issues can enhance the understanding of managers toward people in the organization who have different backgrounds.

Awareness of diversity is one of several factors that executives should consider when screening managerial candidates and determining whether they are likely to provide a good long-term fit for the organization. Unfortunately, interviewers often downplay attitudes toward diversity and similar “people skills” that executives don’t identify as “bottom line” attributes. The same goes for management-training programs, says Nancy Roberts, the “DISC Wizard” and owner of iNights, an organizational-development company focused on motivation and behavior for enhanced employee performance. “People are the most complex part of a business and yet, this is the area new managers receive the least amount of training in,” says Roberts, who’s based in East Rochester, NY. “I’ve helped hire for management positions where the primary responsibilities were given to me as: ‘Profit, Process, Paperwork (reporting), and lastly, People.’ Sadly, I’m not kidding.” She adds that training managers in the latter area is helpful at all phases of an “employee lifecycle,” from recruitment to retention. Continuing the training process helps managers incorporate these ideas into their daily work. “To make that training ‘sticky,’ it needs to be repeated and reinforced until the manager is demonstrating the behaviors required,” Roberts says.

OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

While managers come from various backgrounds, including some from outside the linen, uniform and facility services industry, a common challenge for rising executives is if they come from either a plant- or service-based background, how should company leaders acquaint them with the side of the business with which they’re least familiar? Hamilton says training, with an emphasis on responding quickly to customer needs can help managers that are moving into

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the service side of operations. “Providing great customer service is not always intuitive and new managers who come from an in-plant background may not have all the skills to deal with the challenges that present themselves when dealing with customer relations,” she says. “Undergoing training that involves being proactive to issues, providing a willingness to help all customers, and advocating for the customer will build not only a successful manager but also increase brand loyalty and maintain a competitive edge.” Hodes cautioned that whether managers are moving from plant to service or vice versa, the approach companies should take is that if the new assignment proves unworkable, the manager may return to his or her previous post without penalty. “You don’t want to lose good people,” Hodes says, noting for example that some service people aren’t good at sales. It’s important for both performance and morale to let such employees to “return with honor,” to their former jobs, he says.

While formal education in service or plant-based issues can help managers transition to new roles, Baker suggested a “hands-on” tactic that can enhance skills as well as teamwork. “One way to do this is to have the plant manager ‘shadow’ the customer/service manager as the latter manager conducts his or her daily duties and responsibilities,” Baker says. “This approach helps the plant manager gain a different perspective. Both managers play important but different roles in achieving an organization’s goals. They should not be working at cross purposes but should be carrying out their different functions with a common goal in mind.”

The need for managers to learn how to boost morale across an operation also applies to their ability to resolve disputes that occasionally arise among

co-workers in the plant or on the route. Baker noted that Year I EMI addresses this issue. He works with managers to develop a variety of styles for conflict resolution that are appropriate for a given set of circumstances or individuals. Without such training, managers tend to rely on instincts, which may or may not deliver positive results. “Managers need to be aware that different conflict styles are available to effectively resolve different conflict situations,” Baker says. “In practice, however, managers tend to rely on a primary style and occasionally a backup style. Why? They’re comfortable with those two styles. The point is not whether the manager is ‘comfortable’ but whether the style used is effective in resolving the dispute.” EMI training, says Baker, can add “tools to their toolboxes” and help managers understand that different approaches will work better in given situations.

READYING RISING LEADERS

A common question posed in linen, uniform and facility services circles, as well as politics, manufacturing and other fields is this: are certain people born to lead? Or do they learn leadership skills through experience and training? The consensus view among the experts contacted for this article is that certain skills such as sense of integrity or a focus on teamwork can come naturally to certain executives. However, management training can help them refine these characteristics and learn other skills that can help ensure their success, as well as that of the organization they represent. Kurjan recommended personality testing to assess managers’ skills in various areas and to give top management a clear view of an individual’s mix of strengths and weaknesses. “I am a big fan of utilizing some form of behavioral assessment,” he says. “A behavioral assessment is not a ‘yes or

no’ (for hiring or promotion). It is a tool. It just gives you an opportunity to look at an individual and say: ‘OK, I need somebody who is going to have the strengths to be an outgoing, forward-speaking individual because of their interactions with people. Yet for this person, this is the furthest thing from their comfort area. And it’s not to say that someone who doesn’t possess that naturally can’t develop those skills. But it sure puts them in an uncomfortable position when you ask them to do it.’”

Roberts, who specializes in the DISC (Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Compliance) theory of personality profiling, says that irrespective of personality type, leaders must learn more about themselves and how they relate to others in order to do their jobs effectively—especially as they rise in management ranks. “Many managers get to where they are by knowing the right answers,” Roberts says. “The higher you climb, the more important it is to ask the right questions. Why? Simply because as you move up that chain of command, you can’t possibly know everything going on in your department, like you can when you are overseeing a smaller department or team. So, you’re going to have to rely on the knowledge and expertise of those who work for you.”

A similar need for teamwork applies in the case of family members rising in the leadership ranks of family-owned businesses, but with the added challenge of navigating family relations throughout the company. Training, or in some cases, counseling, can these help managers learn to thrive in a family-business environment, Roberts says. “Family dynamics make team and organizational dynamics even trickier,” she says. “I’ve worked with a lot of second- and third-generation laundries and training that helps family members understand each other’s perspectives and move past their judgments is always helpful.”

A common scenario for rising leaders of family businesses is to work for some period outside of the family business in order to gain a well-rounded outlook on

how a business should operate. In one sense, it's a type of training that gives them a real-world view that a family business leader wouldn't otherwise have. "My No. 1 recommendation is that he or she does not come into the business until he or she has worked two or three years for somebody else outside of the family business," Kurjan says. "The reason is if you simply go from, for instance college, directly into the family business, all you know is the family business. That's all you've ever experienced. There is such great value in seeing another organization and the way they operate and being a part of that. That gives you a chance potentially of bringing a best practice into your family organization—that didn't exist before."

Other types of formal training, especially EMI, can help family business managers not only gain skills but learn whether they're suited to run the business, take on a secondary role, or perhaps pursue a career elsewhere. While this learning process can cause pain to family members, the survival of the family business could hinge on whether a rising leader can demonstrate early on that he or she has the ability to succeed. Hodes suggests family members should get an interview, but little more. Attendance at EMI is OK, he says, because they are a family member. "I'm OK with that and there can be some special fast-tracking, that's OK. But they've got to have the talent, and they've got to have the skills. If they don't...most companies don't make it across generations. Some have. And they have because the leadership have been talented and able and developed."

Few would dispute that the ability of a linen, uniform or facility services company to compete successfully in 2020 requires a variety of skills—from dealing with COVID-19 restrictions to managing diversity issues in the plant and beyond, as well as boosting morale to help control turnover and resolve disputes effectively. In theory, a gifted natural leader, such as a Theodore Roosevelt, could do all these things and learn whatever else he or she needed on their own. But why would you take that chance when

there are abundant resources available, such as EMI, PMI, MBA programs, plus personality profiling analyses and more that can help managers "sharpen their swords"?

Today's executives have access to a variety of tools to help rising managers—including the leaders of family businesses—learn about the business as well as their own management styles. Given the

pressures confronting today's companies, deciding to pursue proactive development of key managers strikes us as one of the easier choices you have to make. As the late Coach Lombardi said, it comes down to having a will to win vs. having the will to *prepare* to win. **TS**

 **JACK MORGAN** is senior editor of *Textile Services*. Contact him at 877.770.9274 or jmorgan@trsa.org.



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