

Greening your Clean: How Phipps Houses made their building operations healthier and more sustainable

A presentation by Ed Rogers, Corporate Vice President, Phipps Housing Services, Inc. for the Managing Lean and Green workshop series sponsored by Pratt Center for Community Development, Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development and the Supportive Housing Network of New York 9/3/08.

Phipps Houses, which manages 14,000 units of affordable housing in NYC made a decision to green the operations of their buildings. This presentation describes the process for changing Phipps cleaning products to be more environmentally friendly and healthier for their staff and tenants and how it won the support of their managers, tenants, and building staff in the process.

Ed Rogers reiterated what *Managing Lean and Green* participants have been hearing repeatedly at sessions focusing on reducing energy: all stakeholders have to be engaged in the process of becoming green, including, managers, supers, porters, vendors, purchasing staff and tenants.

Why green building operations and why it's hard to do

Phipps decided to embark on a process to change the cleaning products in their building. They knew that insecticides, window cleaners, floor products and others are not only bad for the environment but have negative health effects on the people that use them.

Perhaps it is surprising, then, that resistance to this change often comes from the people that benefit most directly.

- *Tenants* associate the smell of bleach and the chemical scents of the usual products with cleanliness. If they don't smell ammonia, they don't believe the floor is clean.
- *Supers* resist changes from products they know. Many eco-products are odorless and color-free. How do you convince someone who is used to blue liquids to accept something clear? Some products are not as effective as products they know.

In addition, the *people that purchase* products may resist higher prices of some products. It may be more difficult to buy in bulk, especially during a trial period when new products are being tested.

How Phipps overcame the obstacles

Phipps made a substantial organizational commitment that worked as follows:

- Building managers, supers, tenants and purchasing staff were engaged in the process as part of an experiment. Phipps knew they could not

just hand over a new line of products to the supers and expect it to work. They created a team of tenants, supers, managers and purchasing staff and established a set a set of objectives. Phipps sent notices, made presentations at monthly tenant meetings, kept tenants informed about product development, and asked tenants for feedback.

- Vendors were engaged; Phipps asked their existing vendors about equivalent products to those they used that were healthier and more environmentally sustainable. Vendors were brought on site to meet with the super and property manager and purchasing people. Meanwhile, they went to other vendors to find out about the green products they offer.

- Phipps tracked costs carefully. They decided early on that they were willing to increase products costs by a maximum of five percent. They were willing to go over 5% of standard cost and have spent that and actually spend 3-4 % more than they did before.

In some cases, costs are less: While Phipps pays about three to four percent more for green cleaning products, their process yielded some individual products that are better and cost less. As an example, the process of refinishing wood floors by sanding and applying polyurethane (a toxic substance) cost about \$5 per square foot. The Mr. Sandless floor company refinishes floors with a coating that cures in only four hours; there is no odor. The process costs less than \$1 dollar per square foot and the treatment lasts for five years. The product has been out for about years but has been mostly used in retail locations.

- Products were field tested and final decisions were based on staff findings. New products were each vetted over a one-month period and benchmarks were set and evaluated.

Some green products were easier to find than others but they persisted and staff concerns were taken seriously, e.g., we have to go over the floor 10 times instead of once; they ended with a product that they have to do two passes (products to clean flooring were especially hard to identify).

- The process was understood as a long-term campaign rather than a one-time event. They had to convince supers and tenants that this was motivated by care for their health rather than profit. Ultimately, the health issues were the most convincing, particularly when combined with attention to staff satisfaction. Phipps organizes refreshers for staff and tenants. The topic is routinely discussed at managers' meetings. It has to be on the agenda for every tenant meeting.

Results

Phipps began the process of greening their operations in the two worst buildings in their management portfolio. In these buildings, totaling 734 units, the conditions were bad, the buildings operated under very tight budgets and they had the most complaints from tenants. At the end of a year-long process to make this switch Phipps found:

- 80% of Phipps' buildings have bought in to the new green products; 20% have not.
- 95% of cleaning products can be changed to be healthier and more environmentally friendly.
- Products costs are about 3-4% more overall; some products cost less.
- Attendance rates among building staff improved; absenteeism decreased according to Phipps' payroll records.
- All of Phipps vendors now sell green, healthy products.

Phipps Houses Services Inc. manages affordable housing and will consult to nonprofit housing managers about how they can green their operations. Phipps also has a bulk fuel purchasing group that buys two million gallons of oil.