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featured
Lenden Lewis:
A Passion for the People



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A PASSION FOR THE PEOPLE

CONTRACT CLEANER LENDEN LEWIS WEIGHS IN ON WHAT IT TAKES TO RUN A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS AND HOW HE HELPED CLEAN UP AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA.

By Andi Curry, Editor

For Lenden Lewis, cleaning has always been about the people. When he started his own contract cleaning business, Lewis Services, Inc. in Lafayette, Louisiana, in 1981, he knew that the only way he'd become successful is by listening to the people—the people who work for him and the people who worked in and managed the buildings he cleaned.

"If you don't have compassion for people, you can't make it in this business," he said.

And in a business where managers often struggle with high em-

ployee turnover, Lewis has found a equation that works and has enabled him to thrive despite increased competition from franchise businesses and large corporations.

"Respect is where it all starts," he advised. "When you have respect for your workers, they will have respect for you."

It's a principle that has helped him substantially grow his business over the past 35 years, expanding into different types of facilities. It has also enabled him to maintain a loyal group of employees by his side for a large part of that ride.

In addition to inspecting, Mr. Lewis can also be found training employees.

THE EARLY YEARS

As a young child, Lewis recalls cleaning his grandmother's antique gold-leaf furniture. He enjoyed the task not only because he could help her do something she wasn't physically able to do, but also because he enjoyed watching the transformation of an object going from dirty to clean.

He carried that passion through his childhood and into his adult years. With a goal of traveling and having the freedom and flexibility to do what he wanted, Lewis graduated school and only lasted a few short years with another contract cleaning business before starting his own company.

"I knew I could do it myself, and I hit the pavement," he said. "I worked day and night to recruit accounts, spending most of the daylight hours selling and marketing, and working throughout the evening hours cleaning the buildings. It was hard work."

One of his keys to success in the early days was establishing clear communication channels—with his customers and cleaners.

As the owner of the business, he took it upon himself to focus on the customer and listen to any issues or concerns they expressed so they could be quickly resolved. He also made sure all jobs had a project manager who was responsible for overseeing everything related to

the account, including employee issues. If there was an issue that couldn't be resolved by the project manager, Lewis made himself available and attempted to resolve the problem himself.

"If you want to be successful in this business, you need to have a consistent team onboard," he advised. "The customer sees their housekeeper every day, and they're not going to be comfortable when you're regularly rotating through staff."

To keep turnover low and help employees feel valued, Lewis recommends treating them with respect and listening to their problems. He also suggests paying employees well.

"When you pay better than your competition, you'll get a better employee who will be more driven. And I share this with the customer too—they know we might not be the cheapest company in town, but that's because we pay our employees above minimum wage. They appreciate that."

FINDING THE RIGHT PEOPLE FOR THE JOB

Another of Lewis' strategies for keeping low turnover is by following a thorough hiring process. When there's an opening, he has someone else help screen the applications, like Monique Alfred, the Business Manager of Lewis Services who has been with the company for almost 15 years. The candidate must demonstrate either through their application or interview that they have a certain level of experience or competency in order to be considered—if their job history shows that they have jumped around, there's a good chance they won't last long working for Lewis.

Following a successful background check, Mr. Lewis conducts an interview and makes the final hiring decision.

"When I interview someone, I try to evaluate how well that individual will be able to perform on a job site. I listen to how they talk about their previous jobs, how they communi-

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cate with me and how they describe the work they did.”

“Personality is another important part of the process,” he continued. “Sometimes you might find a good person, but when assigned to the wrong job, it may not work out well and you might find yourself with a walk-off.”

He shares the story of a man he’d recently hired who’d spent the previous 12 years homeless, but was trying to get a job and turn his life around. When paired with someone else on a job site, there were complications and the man ended up quitting. A few weeks later, a job came up that would allow the man

to work by himself and the results have been spectacular.

“I believe in giving second and even third chances in some situations, but you need to evaluate that person within and look at each situation individually,” said Lewis. “You just can’t pick someone up and throw them on a job site—you need to talk to them, train them and find the right spot for them in order for it to be an effective relationship.”

THE HORRORS OF KATRINA

Lewis vividly remembers watching 7500 people pull up in front of the Cajun Dome following Hur-

ricane Katrina like it was yesterday. His business was one of two companies selected to clean and maintain the sporting facility turned shelter in the days that followed. The other company only lasted a few short weeks before they left the job and left Lewis and his team on their own.

“I will never forget watching the door open on the first bus,” he recalled. “A lady, a little girl and man emerged and you could see they had been in the water. The Salvation Army set up a store and there were showers in the facility so they could get cleaned up and back to normal. But many of those people lost everything and had nowhere to go, so it was an extremely emotional experience for all of us.”

Recognizing the potential that an airborne pathogen could have on the overcrowded facility, Lewis focused on keeping the bathrooms clean.

“We worked with a local temporary employment agency and had a steady team of 60 to 70 people who cleaned the facility on a daily basis,” he said. “I told them that I wanted those restrooms to be so clean that I could smell the germicidal cleaner down the hallway.”

The team worked relentlessly for the next few months, moving around cots and living spaces set up inside the dome. Lewis and his team became something of an extended family to the evacuees, watching out for the children in the facility as well.

“At the end of the day, I would come home, emotionally and physically exhausted,” he recalled. “I would have to leave my clothes at the front door of my house, because I couldn’t be sure what I had come into contact with during the day because of the conditions in



the facility—I mean, we were dealing with needles, viruses, you just didn't know. But we kept it clean. I'm proud of that, even though it was one of the most difficult experiences I've ever endured."

ON THE VALUE OF CERTIFICATION

Lewis originally earned his certification several years ago, but he recently attended a Boot Camp to reinstate his designation. He credits his certification to earning numerous jobs over the years, including the job of keeping the Cajun Dome when it was used as an emergency shelter for Katrina evacuees.

"When people see your certifica-

tion with IEHA, they realize you're vested in your business and you know what you're doing," he said. "It's something few other companies have in our area, so it's really enabled us to differentiate our business."

He goes on to mention how much he enjoyed the Boot Camp session, largely due to the instruction and the quality of the interaction between attendees.

"I wish I could do it again!" he said.

Staying at the top of his game and up to speed on the latest cleaning knowledge is important to Lewis.

"In this industry, you get beat

up and kicked around. It's a tough business," he admits. "But when you know you're doing your best, and you've got a team that is doing their best, you will get ahead if you just keep at it."