

Hiring and Managing the Managers

By John Dunlap – Editor, SSA Globe

It is a given that facility managers are normally the keys to the success of any self storage operation. A building may be new, fresh and have all the bells and whistles, but without good leadership many of the units are likely to remain empty. And facilities that have been around a long time are especially dependent on managers finding a way to make what is old look vital and important.

However, many of our country's self storage facilities are owned and operated by larger corporations, whose job is to make sure that each and every manager is doing the best to keep their units filled and putting smiles on the faces of their customers. All of which leads to the question: Who is managing the managers? What are their expectations, what do they look for in new hires, how do they manage (or micro-manage) their managers, and what techniques work best to bring out the best in their troops?

If you are the owner/operator of a single facility you essentially are keeping a tab on yourself. But you can still learn from our group of experts who have passed along their priorities in working with managers. Our experts include John Gilliland, president of Investment Real Estate LLC; Brenda Scarborough of Accountable Management and Realty Inc.; and Dave Aleszczyk, the senior district manager for United Stor-All Management.



"Freedom of expression for the managers is always encouraged... (still) managers must go through the proper channels."

~ Brenda Scarborough
Accountable Management and Realty Inc

To start with, what traits do companies look for in hiring new managers?

"We try to find managers with great personalities and sales experience," says Gilliland. "It's not difficult to teach them about the industry or what our procedures are, but it can be difficult to teach someone how to sell and communicate well with customers."

"In today's market, I'm looking for customer service, sales and marketing...the rest I can teach them. But if they don't have those strong skills the rest aren't even important," adds Scarborough.

"I have always looked for the outgoing, personable type that has great customer service skills," says Aleszczyk. "As

time has worn on, I found a good business sense was absolutely necessary. Now, I have made a willingness to market outside and sell their facility an additional must to get through the door. Our industry has grown increasingly more competitive and our primary managers not only need to excel at taking care of their customers but also need to be salespeople and able to close the deal!"

How Tight a Rein?

Nobody likes to work with a person staring over their shoulder, so the question of how often and how forcefully a manager should be guided is important. That said, virtually all the experts agreed that regular contact with managers is important.

"When it comes to supervising my management team we communicate on a regular basis," Aleszczyk says. "Our main form of contact is via e-mail, however, I do have personal contact with each of my managers a minimum of two times per week, whether they require it or not!"

Scarborough also is in touch with her managers on virtually a daily basis, thanks to e-mails.

Then the ticklish question comes up about how much freedom each individual manager has and the potential that exists for micro-managing those individuals.

"When posed with the question about micro-managing, I thought a lot about my own career and past experiences," says Aleszczyk. "I myself have been micro-managed and was not a big fan of it. I felt it hampered my ability to be creative and make decisions, thus I have not implemented this into my management style. With that being said, every manager has different needs and skill sets. Some managers both want and need more attention, and I work to manage my team based on those needs. Ultimately, we collectively work to make both the management team and the facility as successful as possible."

Scarborough echoes those thoughts. "Freedom of expression for the managers is always encouraged and, honestly, almost everything I have ever done in the last 20 years has come from the managers," she says. "The one thing, though, is that with 41 stores, all the managers must go through the proper channel and not just go off and do what they want. All 41 stores are run the same, so they need to make certain that we approve and find it beneficial to all, and then the change is made. As far as micro-managing is concerned, when you are a management company you

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try not to, but if they insist on not following the guidelines then that would be how it might feel to them."

Gilliland thinks his managers can use their own creativity and talents, but within a structure.

"Most software packages offer some flexibility in the functions store managers can use," Gilliland says. "For instance, you should be able to limit the number of late fees waived for a customer in a year, remove the ability to move a tenant in at a rate lower than the street rate, or limit the types and amount of promotions used. We try to give our managers enough room to do what they need to do to close a sale, but measure and track what they are doing every day. That helps us manage by exception. If we find a property with too many waived fees, we can coach that manager on the topic and adjust the settings in the system for that site to help avoid that from happening going forward. We track key statistics daily, and have monthly financial audits and comprehensive quarterly audits done at all the stores we manage."

Gauging the Performance

So, while the answer to managing the managers teeters between both structure and freedom, there is still one topic on which everyone can agree: results. It is in that area that grey becomes black and white.



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*~ John Gilliland
Investment Real Estate LLC*

"There are several areas I look at when determining how a manager is performing," says Aleszczyk. "Each manager is given the tools and opportunity to be successful. I have always shared the property expectations with the site management via the operating budget. I believe the true buy-in begins when the staff knows what is expected of them including, overall rental activity, total revenue and expense management. I update the sites on a weekly basis by sharing the entire district stats versus budget. This creates both a sense of urgency to perform and brings out the competitiveness in the district."

And Scarborough thinks that the best way to gauge a manager is to see if they have a single quality she most cherishes.

"Self motivation!" she says. "That seems to be the hardest thing to get them to do—to find good ideas and try them. If they have a problem, then I would like for them to bring me the possible solution...not just the problem." ❖

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