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## operationslog

### HAND TOOLS

# Training Employees To Use Color-Coded Equipment

By Dan Weltin, Editor

Simply touching a contaminated surface and then coming into contact with another surface will quickly spread diseases around any facility. Cold and influenza viruses are found on 30 percent of surfaces in commercial offices, says Dr. Charles Gerba Ph.D., microbiology professor at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Pair this with the fact that people touch about 30 objects a minute (their keyboard keys, mouse, pens, phone

other hand tools will help reduce the potential for cross-contamination by ensuring tools used to clean high-risk areas stay in those areas and that other tools don't enter.

The industry standard color-coding system includes red for high-risk areas such as toilets and urinals; yellow for low-risk restroom areas including sinks and mirrors; blue for all-purpose cleaning (dusting, window cleaning, wiping desks, etc.) in other areas of a facility;

Building Services Inc., Wyoming, Mich. "They roll their eyes and say, 'A mop is a mop, a towel is a towel.'"

To reach these employees, BSCs need to do more than just train how to use the different colors to clean. BSCs need to also explain why this system matters.

"The most important thing is for workers to know about the germs they are spreading," says Jimmy McKiernan, director of operations for First Quality Maintenance in New York. "We had a meeting with all the cleaners and let them know that you can't use the same rag you use in the bathroom to wipe down a phone."

Once employees understand they are reducing the spread of germs, most get on board immediately and with few problems, say BSCs.

"We clean a lot of pediatric buildings for rotavirus," says Thompson. "We educate the staff about the virus and since many employees have kids of their own, they grasp pretty quickly that they don't want to take disease from one area of the building to the next."

For some workers, color-coding even brings about a sense of empowerment.

"We tell them it's not just a job, it's a profession," says Thompson. "It's their responsibility to keep [building occupants] healthy."

Sometimes switching to color-coded products can be difficult because cleaners are used to routine.

**Some employees say, 'A mop is a mop,' but once we educate them on cross-contamination, they quickly grasp the difference**

buttons, etc.) and it's easy to see why cross-contamination is a serious threat.

While these statistics are alarming enough, keep in mind this only pertains to office areas. Imagine how bad it would be if diseases from the restroom find their way into the office.

"If you pick up salmonella in the restroom, it'll be in the product you were using to clean. Now, if you bring that same product out into the general office area, you've just contaminated the entire office," says Dr. Gerba. "You only have to do it once."

Using color-coded mop heads, buckets, rags, microfiber cloths and

and green for food-service areas. However, some building service contractors devise their own color combinations to meet their specific needs.

Transitioning to a color-coded system should be as simple as switching from one colored product to many, but unfortunately, things are never that easy.

**PROPER TRAINING** Change can be hard for cleaning crews who are used to doing things a certain way. Implementing color-coded products is not always a smooth process.

"To some employees it seems silly," says Jim Thompson, owner of A-One

After using the same product for so long, cleaners have to adapt to the mindset of using different colors for different reasons, says McKiernan.

To avoid the potential problems, BSCs can post a color-coding chart by the time clock, in the locker room, on the cleaning cart or in other areas to serve as reminders. Cleaners can also be designated tasks based on the color systems.

"Our bathroom cleaners only get the right colors," says McKiernan. "We're trying to take the guesswork out of it so there's no way for the cleaners to mess up."

Also, BSCs should make sure they have enough quantity for each color to prevent employees from using a red cloth, for instance, if they run out of blue ones, says Ken Law, CBSE, Georgia area sales manager for Spartanburg, S.C.-based Diversco Integrated Services.

Some employees may also have trouble adjusting to the fact that many color-coded products are launderable and can be re-used. After using disposable rags for so long, cleaners may not always remember to throw the cloth in

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the laundry hamper rather than the trash can, says Law.

#### **MANAGERIAL ADVANTAGES**

Switching to color-coded tools also has some hidden benefits. Using specific colors makes it easier for supervisors to monitor employees and make sure they are cleaning correctly.

"It's easy to walk into an area and if you see an employee using a red cloth to wipe down a breakroom table, you know there's something wrong with this picture," says Law.

BSCs can also get an accurate picture of what's going on in the building when laundering the cloths and mop heads, says Thompson. For example, if 20 red mop heads are typically used to clean a building and now there are less mop heads to wash, supervisors will know either mop heads aren't being changed often enough or that area is being cleaned less frequently, Thompson explains. In this example, both scenarios are unwanted and BSCs will be able correct the situation before it becomes worse.

Implementing color-coded products isn't always as simple as 1-2-3. However, with proper training that includes the "whys" of cleaning along with the "how-tos," employees will better understand the new products and be able to protect their customers from the threat of cross-contamination. ❏

*Editor's Note: Dr. Charles P. Gerba, Ph.D. will be speaking at ISSA/INTER-CLEAN<sup>®</sup> North America in Orlando, Fla. on Tuesday, Oct. 23. His presentation titled "Public Cross-Contamination: The Cleaning Industry's Impact in the Most Surprising of Places" is sponsored by Contracting Profits.*