Treasuring HLSD

Has your property been diagnosed with Hotel Laundry Staffing Disorder?

O perating a laundry facility effectively takes a delicate balance of managing time and expenses. Of those expenses, staff labor takes the largest piece of the pie. Laundry staff is also the key component in delivering quality services and product. Therefore, how the staff is managed will have the biggest effect on the overall operating health of a property. Hospitality laundries have their own unique sets of parameters and issues than other laundry facilities.

Hotels are challenged with keep staffing expenses down, par levels up, and guest satisfaction high. Some issues are straight forward: more and well-trained staff, and improved processes. Some solutions are not so straightforward and take investigation. What works in terms of staffing for healthcare laundries will not always work for hotels due to the fluctuation in seasonal guest flow or even work day vs. weekend guests, and how the laundry as a department interacts within or beside other departments. The hotel industry can vary widely based on season or events. A temporary workspace is essential throughout a property, and the laundry is no exception to the rule. How do hotels manage this unique situation? Many managers have had to work to find specific solutions to these problems.

James Brewster, RLLD, Executive Housekeeper of The Resort at Glade Springs, in Daniels, W. Va., says he schedules staffing based on occupancy. “I determine the pound per room and pound per guest and…multiply the occupancy, divide by seven. That’s how I staff the laundry, by the number of labor hours [this calculation] gives me for the week.”

Glen Harvey, CLLM, Director of Laundry Operations of the Four Seasons Resort and Club in Irving, Texas says his facility follows a similar method. “If occupancy is heavy, then variables kick in, allowing more staff hours. Valet labor [staff members who process guest garments as well as employee uniforms, and are trained to handling guest requests or special instructions] is scheduled for the day of occupancy. This is so that we can schedule the correct staff to process employee uniforms as well as guest items.”

Keeping an eye on occupancy and adjusting staffing needs accordingly is often more cost effective than having staff on a set schedule. Providing time off when demands are low means less overtime paid when they have to pull extra hours for a heavy guest occupancy time.

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“During peak periods of the season, hotels use more temporary employees,” says Kate Lerch-Brown, RLILD, Director of Laundry at Trade Winds Resort in St. Petersburg, Fla. “When it starts to get slow, we cut the temporary help. Our schedule is determined by the occupancy reports that we receive every Tuesday from our revenue department.”

How the laundry is managed can have an impact as well. If it is a stand-alone department, the laundry manager will have more control over budget and scheduling. However, this can also present obstacles. Harvey points out that preventative maintenance and repairs can be problematic. At his facility “the Laundry Engineer does not report to the Laundry Manager, but to the Chief Engineer for the entire hotel. Conflict occurs when equipment that needs to be repaired or maintained is pushed aside due to budget or schedule priorities. We meet the challenge by working closely together.”

When the laundry is part of another department, like housekeeping, there is the challenge of separating the needs or practices of one department from another. Dining and bell staff are utilized more during the day, and when the rooms are fullest. However, laundry needs increase more at night or after the guests are gone. This is especially true if the hotel or resort has a “green” initiative in which guests are encouraged to reuse linens rather than request new ones every day. In this case, par levels are lower than at a traditionally run facility that changes sheets and towels every day of a guest’s stay.

Keeping this in mind, a laundry manager would not pattern the staffing schedule as other departments. Smart thinking in this area can lower costs and provide higher quality services. Appropriate staffing to do the right job at the right time means the laundry provides the housekeeping department with the right amount of linens when it is needed.
“Adequate pars are essential in running a smooth laundry operation says Harvey. Without correct pars, you are constantly running in circles, chasing your tail or putting out fires. Quality staffing is also essential since you have to trust your staff will do the right sequence of services so the guest is not effected”.

“I have the flexibility of bringing [staff] in early, staying late, staggering shifts, and so on,” says Brewster. “It is all about the flow of hotel business and demand for linens.”

In the accompanying story below, you can see an example of how a hotel laundry’s practices impacted guest experience. Due to linen par levels being below actual needs, dining and laundry staff found themselves battling for elevator access to deliver meals and linens to the floors. This is the type of trickle-down effect poor planning can have on the overall success of not just the laundry but the entire property.

If a laundry facility is struggling, or even if another facet of guest services is experiencing difficulties, looking at the big picture and how all departments work in sync may reveal obvious solutions. In the end however, it is always the human factor that has the greatest impact.

The Consequence of Short Par Levels

A newly opened five-star hotel started out with a short par level, intending to increase it over time. However, this did not happen, seemingly without consequence.

The hotel did well save for one area: increased complaints about breakfast room-service orders arriving late. The hotel was forced to comp these meals but still had unhappy guests who either were not able to eat the meal or were late for any morning appointments or activities.

Stymied, the general manager followed the problem, starting in the kitchen. However, the problem was not there. The meals were being prepared promptly and were ready for delivery at the time requested. The next step was to ask the staff that delivered the meals. They were punctual when picking up the meals, but when it came time to use the service elevators to take them up, they were forced to wait a considerable amount of time, making impossible for kitchen staff to get the meals to the rooms on time.

After more research the problem was found: low linen par levels. Because of the low levels, linens that were taken out of the rooms at check-out had to be washed and taken right back to the floors; there weren’t enough linens to stock the floor linen closets for housekeeping to use in remaking the rooms. So in the early morning, staff had to scramble to fill these closets. What they were doing was taking the linen cart on the elevator, pushing it halfway out of the elevator to hold it, running to each end of the floor to fill the closets, coming back and going to the next floor to do it all again. This held up the service elevator, making impossible for kitchen staff to get the meals to the rooms on time.

If the hotel had ordered adequate par, these closets would have stayed fully stocked while soiled linens where being washed, completely negating the need for laundry staff to scramble to fill the closets in the morning for that day’s use. While it might not seem apparent that what happens in the laundry will affect total hotel operation, this example proves otherwise.

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