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The Growth Years

The Clean and Dirty Side
of Employee Manuals

Class is in Session



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the clean and dirty side of **EMPLOYEE MANUALS**

By Jeffrey Reed

Every window cleaning company, no matter what size, marks success by three basic measures: revenue; growth; and a good track record, including safety and customer satisfaction. Whether a company is a one-person operation or a business employing scores of window cleaners, each and every company benefits from an employee manual – a blueprint of success.

Although not required by either state or federal law, an employee manual – or handbook – is a must-have tool for any window cleaning company. Look carefully behind the cover of any manual and you will see much more than employee policies and procedures. While such content is important to company efficiency and effectiveness, an employee manual can actually motivate through clear communication and listing of attainable goals and rewards.

However, developing an employee manual requires careful consideration of content. Most of all, it demands input and editing by your legal counsel. Published properly and updated correctly, an employee manual will become your company bible.

Safety first

When Ron Friman founded Chicago-based Expert Window Cleaning in 1979, his employee manual consisted of a double-sided page of instructions stating what was expected of his workers. Today, with 15 employees, Expert Window Cleaning boasts a 200-page book, beginning with a chapter on safety.

“All you need to do is miss something in your manual about safety, have one of your service people get involved in an accident and you have some fairly large problems,” explains Friman regarding the importance of careful inclusion of employee manual content.

Developed through input from family and

friends with businesses and borrowing the best from existing handbooks, Friman involved a lawyer in the writing and editing of his employee manual – not only to include all necessary material but also to avoid the inclusion of material that could mislead employees or put the company in a libelous situation.

“You really should have an attorney’s input,” says Friman. “This is one reason why it has taken 20-plus years to fully develop our manual. In the first ten years there were some holes. It was inconsistent. Legal consultation is extremely important. All it takes is one disgruntled employee to take down a small company.”

However, Friman realizes not only does the manual protect his company; it also helps his employees perform to the best of their abilities. Every Expert Window Cleaning employee receives a company manual and must pass a 100-question multiple-choice exam before heading out into the field. Each year, the manual is updated, including such items as employee and company responsibilities and safety updates. It’s all part of a winning formula for Friman’s company.

Divided handbook, unified company

Another Chicago-based window cleaning company, Service One Inc., includes union and non-union workers amongst its 45 employees. Tom Trinen, IWCA President 2000 and currently involved with training certification, established Service One in 1984 and almost immediately published an employee handbook, which today still proudly states the company’s mission statement.

Yet, with a large workforce of union and non-union employees, and acknowledging the importance of a thorough employee handbook, Trinen has created several manuals for his staff. Addressing the union versus

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Employee Manual

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non-union issue, he has implemented two handbooks outlining employee benefits and guidelines. "It's easier to update this way," Trinen explains. "When there's a union contract negotiation and benefit changes, it's easier to update. Two manuals – one for management and office staff, and another for union employees – works well for us."

Service One uses a procedures and guidelines manual for management who can easily reference items such as job descriptions and company pro-

cedures. A third manual, consisting of training modules for the window cleaners, stresses, for example, safe operation of equipment. Having separate manuals such as these easily allows for updates, which can add information on topics, including new equipment acquisitions and operation and change in job descriptions.

Trinen, too, consulted legal counsel while writing his company manuals, a policy he continues during revisions to his manuals. In fact, an all-important portion of the ongoing development of

his manuals involves legal advice.

The Service One manuals, for example, wisely include a statement that the manuals can be revised at any time. Trinen adds, "You need to be careful not to create any kind of legal contract between you and your employees. You must be careful what you include. But at the same time, you must include a number of things in order to avoid legal issues and potential lawsuits. The upside of having a manual far outweighs the downside."

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INS AND OUTS of employee manuals

The purpose of an employee manual is twofold: to protect your company and to protect your employees. With legal costs rising and legal action against employers on the rise, the employee manual has quickly become a staple for a growing number of successful businesses. Policies and procedures covering items such as safety, maternity leave, conflict of interest, sexual harassment, wages and salaries and employee termination are all subjects that should leave no gray area in terms of understanding.

First and foremost, employ the services of an attorney who practices employment law when developing your company's employee manual. Update it on a regular basis. Give each employee a copy of your manual and have him or her sign a receipt that states they have received it and also understand its content.

Today's window cleaners are much more sophisticated than their predecessors. New improved tools, additional education opportunities and growing staff numbers all demand the inclusion of an employee manual in every company's day-to-day operations. With an employee manual a company expresses its attempt to comply with laws and shows that its management has given careful thought to their decisions.

What you should include in an employee manual:

- Work hours, overtime policy
- All company policies, procedures (i.e., job performance review, drug and alcohol policies)
- Information on proper communication channels
- Acceptable workplace behavior
- Electronic communications, i.e., e-mail, fax and telephone policies
- Benefits
- Grounds for dismissal – an "at will" statement permitting employee termination at any time and without cause when permissible under state law
- Positive thinking – what company policy allows and encourages, i.e., proper dress, allowable parking areas
- What is expected from employees and what they can expect from the company
- Statement that the manual can be changed at any time
- A disclaimer denying an intent to form a contract

What to avoid in an employee manual:

- Confusing legal terms
- Any requirement of employees to inform management of pregnancy or plans for pregnancy
- Any words or phrases implying that employees are permanent
- Negative thinking – what company policy discourages, i.e. improper dress, places where parking is prohibited
- Any language intending to form a contract

Employee manuals: black and white

Another 45-employee strong company, Jim Grady's Tri-State Window Cleaning of Poughkeepsie, NY, also utilizes separate employee manuals. Founded in 1988, Tri-State has a manual covering administrative policies, as well as a separate manual covering safety issues. As IWCA immediate past-president and a member of PWNA, BOMA and SWRI, Grady can't stress enough the importance of safety and thus distributes a safety handbook, custom designed by IWCA safety director, Stefan Bright.

"When new standards like I14.1 come into place, we update our safety manual," says Grady. "In our administrative manual, we update with information such as changes in vacation allowance." Adds Grady, "Every company should have an employee manual for people in the field and for office staff. Our handbooks cover everything from retirement policies to employee

benefits, acceptable behavior, sick days and tardiness and allowable punishments for actions that are outlined as being out of line."

All of this information is critical to operating a successful business, according to Grady, who admits he didn't use an employee manual during the early days of Tri-State. However, he quickly recognized the necessity of a manual.

"When you add employees, you realize that you must have a clear set of rules for all employees," Grady explains. "I would give information to one employee and not necessarily give the same information to another. I needed to have regulations in writing — put it in black and white. Everyone must play by the same rules."

With the help of a labor lawyer, and borrowing from existing credible handbooks, Grady has developed a strong set of manuals for Tri-State. Each employee must sign a statement saying that he or she has read

the manuals and understands their content. If a question arises amongst staff, Grady can refer directly to the employee manuals.

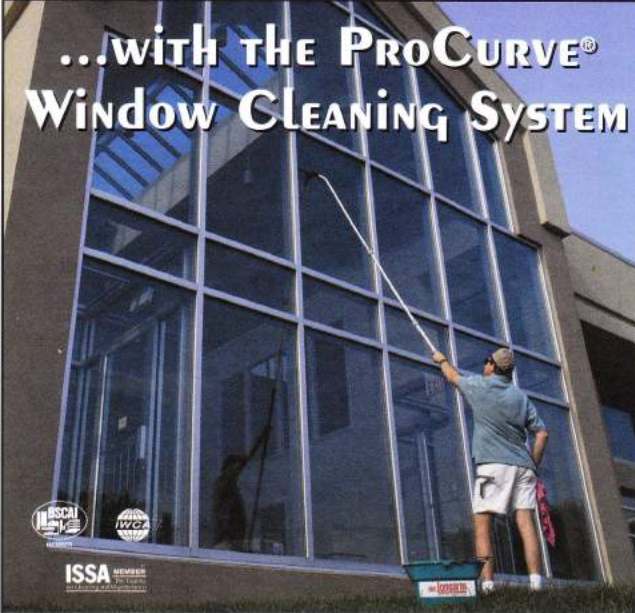
"There are two purposes for an employee manual," explains Grady. "You can communicate much more efficiently with your employees and you can avoid legal issues."

Indeed, an employee manual serves a myriad of purposes for businesses of every size. By giving each employee a personal copy of the company manual, it offers him or her a sense of pride in belonging to a company, which recognizes the importance of clear communication. Thus, employee morale can attain heightened levels. This is often the first step to overall company success, which in the short and long term benefits both the owner and the team of dedicated, educated employees.

After all, an employee manual really is, a company's blueprint of success. /

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