

Musical Chairs At Work

I hear these kinds of comments all the time - “our maintenance guy won’t do that!” “what do they do all day?” “leasing agents have it easy – they should work one day in our shoes”. There tends to be animosity and friction between the two “sides” in any property management team – maintenance and the leasing or office staff. Why does this tension exist and what can we do about it? Start by going out to eat.

Our industry can benefit by trying a concept that has been employed by finer restaurants for years. When a new employee starts, regardless of their eventual position, they are rotated through all of the other crucial functions at the restaurant in order to understand what that function is all about, and how it will impact their job. Fans of Rocco de Spirito’s “The Restaurant” on NBC a couple of years ago will remember that when one waiter failed to make the grade, he merely demoted him to dishwasher. Well, what is that saying to the employees who already serve as dishwashers? That their job is useless, unimportant, a punishment of sorts. Great – I am already leery enough of restaurant utensils, I don’t want to see what happens when ticked-off dishwashers are on duty. Demoting the waiter did nothing to create a harmonious work environment. Can you imagine how great the attitude of your maintenance team would be if you “punished” your leasing consultants by sending them to tinker with the HVAC? Rocco should have instead had each employee rotate through each of the essential functions at his restaurant so they could see their place in the greater whole. Many great restaurants and some of the larger, successful chains do this right from the get go. A new employee hired as a waiter may work an entire week before hitting the floor or taking an order. They work alongside the cooks in the kitchen to learn how important the written tickets are or the nuances of a fire grill when cooking a rare or medium-well steak. They work as an “expo”, the last person in the kitchen to see the plate of food and send it out to the diner. They work as a host or maitre ‘d to see how important it is to properly space out the

seatings in individual waiters' sections so that they don't get overwhelmed and that the quality of service does not suffer. They work as a bar back or bartender, so that they learn how to sell different drinks and what pairings of wine might complement a meal. And yes, many times they work a day in the shoes of a dishwasher or bus boy so that they can see what it would be like in a restaurant without these crucial functions. By the time they greet their first table, they are well versed in the functions of the restaurant as a whole. They have seen a medium-well filet cook and know how long it takes. They know that certain appetizers or meal selections are best for people in a hurry to make the start of a movie. They have seen that red lipstick rarely comes off a water glass without being scrubbed by hand. But most importantly - they realize that of all the jobs in the restaurant, none is more important than the other. They all rely on each other and are necessary for the overall success of the restaurant. Okay, well maybe not the wine sommelier, that guy just gets to have fun suggesting wines all night. Playing musical chairs at work is a great way to build a team and create an environment where each of your employees appreciates the contribution of another. Wouldn't that be refreshing in property management?

The thing is - it is easy to think the grass is greener. Maintenance people climb up and down stairs all day, in and out of apartments that may or may not be clean, air-conditioned or even safe. They walk around the property all day and get hot and sticky. They get grease and dirt, dust and cobwebs all over them. They see apartments that have been skipped out of and never cleaned. So when they walk in to the leasing office and see a leasing consultant gabbing on the phone or making copies, it's only natural that a bit of resentment would grow. The opposite is also true – when do maintenance folks have to deal with screaming residents on one phone line, weird questions from a likely shopper on another and the demanding looks of the UPS guy who wants to unload twelve heavy packages on your desk? The only way we can see the other side is to walk a mile in those shoes.

So quick – make your leasing team fix everything and have your maintenance guys lease apartments tomorrow. Oh wait, that won't work. I don't know of too many leasing consultants that can replace a fan blade on a heater or fix the coils on a stove. And I don't even want to talk about the few times I have had a maintenance guy show me a model apartment. Having an employee shadow the other employee for a day or two is the best way to accomplish this. That way, you can be sure that things are still being done correctly but are being experienced by the other staffer. Plus, the two of them working together for one or two days builds a new level of camaraderie and friendship that likely didn't exist prior.

Not only does this concept help your staff become a true team, it tends to have benefits in customer service and resident retention as well. When a leasing consultant takes down a maintenance request but doesn't understand the nature of the problem or the steps that will be taken to fix it, how can they communicate with the resident what will likely transpire? They can't. So the generic "we will get that taken care of right away" is the usual answer. This can lead to unrealistic expectations from the resident or frustration that the problem isn't treated with more urgency. When the leasing consultant has worked with maintenance and seen many problems to successful conclusions, they can better communicate with residents what steps will be taken to address a problem. They know which situations are hazards or emergencies, and which are back burner issues. This leads to satisfied residents and successful, confident employees.

I am a big believer in learning from other industries. This musical chairs concept has worked well for restaurants for years and it is about time we stole from our friends in food service. We don't have to reinvent the wheel in property management when we can order up a ready-made solution off the menu of another field! Have you given this a shot and your team still doesn't get along? When all else fails, I recommend calling a consultant!



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