CROSSING THE LINE FROM CLEAN TO DIRTY

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The concept of a 'performance-based contract' (PBC) is something that is neither new nor foreign. In Malaysia, PBC began in the late 90's and began to gain traction during the following decade. Initially, the set of key performance indicators (KPIs) that normally accompanies a PBC was only there as a reference point, a more objective way of assessing how facility management (FM) contractors deliver their services. However, as FM PBCs evolved, it became inclined towards fee deduction, which actually was a positive development as it reinforces the purpose of having KPIs.

Whilst the concept of PBC is generally accepted as best practice worldwide, it is not without challenges and one of them is the establishment of an objective and measurable set of performance targets. Some of these are relatively straight forward such as response time, turnaround time, number of customer fault reports, etc. However, some performance metrics are not as obvious and the lack of a complete and quantifiable set of performance standards that can be included in an FM contract poses a significant hurdle in implementing PBC.

Cleaning and housekeeping is an integral aspect of FM and it is rather ironic that the metrics of this particular service is one of the trickiest to determine. Identifying the performance standard and targets remained a murky swamp of differing opinions. What is dirty? What is clean? At which point does the lack of cleanliness become unacceptable? One attempt to resolve this ambiguity was by just specifying that the surface is to be "clean at all times". Whilst seemingly clear, this is an erroneous simplification and is neither realistic nor fair. Another attempt was to emulate the hotel industry star rating system, which is to say that if the highest standard of cleaning is desired, then the service should be at par with a 5-star hotel. While this approach might get us closer towards our objective, not every built environment can subscribe to the hotel type rating system. Still, a PBC is supposed to have KPIs that are clear, distinct and agreeable by both client and service provider.

So where do we go from here?

Perhaps we can start by looking at the nature of the cleaning task and the accumulation of dust, dirt, impurities and stains. There are few basic points that we need to clearly understand, namely:

a) A surface (floor, wall, windows, etc.) gets dirtier with time. This shouldn't be difficult to grasp. However, the rate of dirt built up may vary from time to time.

b) It is impossible to have a surface clean all the time (in an economically feasible way to both client and service provider).

c) A surface is totally clean immediately after each cleaning.

d) It is easier to agree on what is clean than what is dirty. A totally clean surface is not up to much ambiguity. However, the acceptable level of dirtiness (the point where the condition of a surface starts to cross the line from being clean to being dirty) vary from person to person. This is one of the key challenges in prescribing a measurable acceptance level of cleanliness.

The chart below depicts this cycle of a surface getting variably dirty over time despite being cleaned at the same interval.
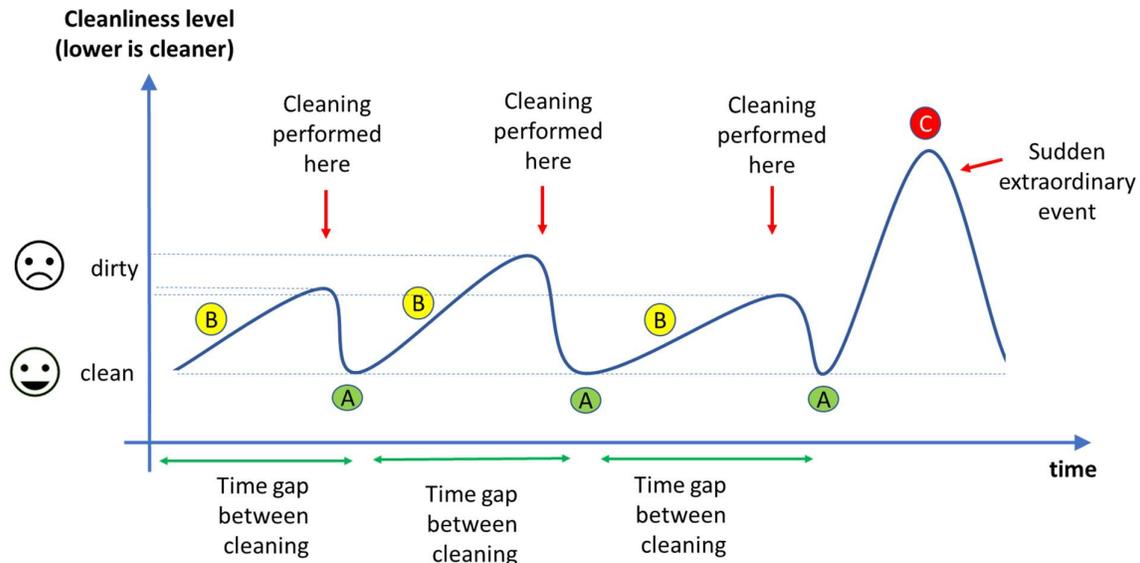
A surface gets dirty over time (curve rises upwards). When it is cleaned, the cleanliness drastically improves (point A). Then it gradually gets dirtier again, though in this case the level of cleanliness may become worse than before, prior to it being cleaned again. The build up of dirt is inconsistent in nature.

So where does this leave us?

The purpose and nature of cleaning is to be viewed as a control activity. It is impossible to keep everything spotless permanently. This is similar to the concept of pest control and why it is not called pest elimination. The same is true for safety, where the idea is to control the number of accidents, because it is impossible to avoid it permanently. Also consider maintenance, which is about preventing failure by doing regular or proactive maintenance. Will there be still be breakdowns? Yes, but it will be minimised or in other words, controlled.

In cleaning, controlling is performed by three mechanisms:

a. Ensuring cleaning is done right every time is it performed. This requires:
   - Skilled personnel
   - Good technique, tools and material

b. Setting the right time gap between cleaning. To do this, the following can be of assistance:

- Cleaning frequencies to be set using a Smart Cleaning approach.

- IoT and available digital technologies can be implemented to trigger cleaning activities (e.g. video analytics, user rating system and water consumption meters). If this is implemented then the cleaning frequency will vary based on condition.

- Utilise benchmarking as a guide, find out comparable facilities and their cleaning routines. A service provider can also be a source of information.

- Know that reducing the interval (increasing the frequency) will reduce the level of "dirtiness" a surface gets to prior to its next scheduled cleaning. (see above chart)

c. Ensuring there are mechanisms to handle extraordinary events (Point C in chart)

- Should there be an event that suddenly increases the need for cleaning (in between cleanings) such as spillages, leakages or accidents then there must a way for the service provider to address it.

- Having a culture of proactiveness will have a very positive impact

The abovementioned document *MS2550:2014 Malaysian Standard on Cleaning Performance: Commercial and Public Buildings* provides great insight and assistance in the performance management of cleaning services. The standard provides a good overview and specifications on:

1. The frequency of cleaning required for various spaces and surfaces in a building

2. The condition of a surface:
   a. Immediately after cleaning (item A in chart)
   b. In between being cleaned (item B in chart)
   c. Unacceptable level (item C in chart)

3. Determining the delivery on the cleaning service based on joint inspections.

It is hoped that the foregoing has been informative about the cleaning function, how to determine the desired performance metrics and ideas on how to better design and control the process, which are crucial in achieving the desired outcome.

Clean facilities to all!