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Mary Miller's vision of helping employees **achieve their life ambitions** has reduced turnover and improved productivity for JANCOA

By Dan Weltin, Editor-in-Chief



IT COSTS MORE THAN \$1,600 to replace a trained janitor. So, wouldn't it make financial sense to do whatever it takes to keep these employees for as long as possible? Yet, building service contractors experience turnover rates ranging from 35 to 75 percent. And for some unfortunate BSCs, turnover runs as high as 400 percent.

Contract cleaning is a people business. No amount of product technology will cover up the shortcomings of a poorly trained and unmotivated worker.

Mary Miller, CEO of Cincinnati-based JANCOA, learned this lesson 20 years ago and has been perfecting her solution ever since. In fact, her innovative answer to turnover just garnered the company Bronze for Best Place to Work at the Best in Biz Awards in 2013.

So, what's her secret? Focus on employees' dreams and goals.

"The Dream Manager program is about inspiring our employees to really go after what they want in their lives," says Mary. "There are not too many people who grow up and want to be a janitor."

Whether it's buying a house or going to nursing school, Mary, along with husband and company Founder Tony Miller and Dream Manager Joe Candellica, identify what each employee feels is missing from his life and put him back on that path.

"For the most part, janitorial is a transitional job on the way to something else," says Mary. "Frequently they forget what they were on their way to because of disappointment and frustration in their lives. We get the opportunity to help awaken what people really want to do in their lives."

Not only do employees benefit from the program, but by taking an interest in their employees' lives, JANCOA has improved employee retention. Since its inception, turnover has dropped from more than 100 percent down to just 65 percent.

A People Problem

BSCs may have heard of the book "The Dream Manager" by Matthew Kelly, of Floyd Consulting. It tells the story of Admiral Janitorial Services, a fictitious contract cleaning

company who turns its turnover problem around by helping its employees achieve their life-long ambitions. However, few readers may realize this remarkable story is based on JANCOA and an idea born out of conversations between Mary and Tony.

Tony started JANCOA in 1970 as a 19-year-old college student. For the next 20 years, he ran a steady, sustainable company as a way to take care of his extended family. But it was when Mary, Tony's third wife, came on board that JANCOA began to transition from a respectable "mom and pop" shop into the sophisticated building service contractor it is today.

While attending her first Building Service Contractors Association International conference, Mary met a consultant who promised he could improve the company's cleaning processes and efficiencies. But he quickly realized there was no fixing JANCOA — the company didn't have a cleaning problem, it had a people problem. Whether they were late, absent, or flat-out quit, there were never enough janitors available to clean the buildings. In fact, Mary and Tony even needed the consultant to help vacuum one night.

Back then, Tony and Mary viewed janitors as no different than the mops, vacuums and chemicals they used. Janitors and their products had the same purpose: clean the building. But just as a vacuum needs maintenance and care to work properly, so do people. In fact, people need it more.

"If you're breathing, you need encouragement," says Mary. "You need to have dreams to be excited about and something to look forward to."

When the consultant quit after two days, things finally clicked for Mary and Tony. If they invested more in their staff, employees would in turn invest more of themselves in JANCOA.

"When you have people really working toward something, rather than just going through the motions, it makes a huge difference in quality [of cleaning]," says Mary.

She made it her goal to figure out what was missing from the lives of her staff members.

First Steps

The first move to help improve the lives of employees was to change the 65 part-time employees to full time and offer benefits.

Then Mary and Tony began informally surveying their employees, asking them what were the biggest obstacles in getting to work. The answer was clear: a lack of transportation. Cleaning takes place at night, often after public transportation has ended. And not every employee lives near the bus lines or has access to a car.

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So Tony became the driver of the JANCOA shuttle, picking up workers at their homes and dropping them off at their worksites. The solution all but eliminated absenteeism and tardiness; turnover began to shrink.

By transporting workers, Tony was given a window into the world of his employees — and he was surprised by what he saw.

“Tony would come home and say, ‘You can’t imagine how these people are living and how many people live together,’” says Mary.

Mary and Tony began discussing what else they could do to improve their staff’s quality of life. The shuttle

rent, she received an eviction notice on Christmas Eve. Mary was forced to put blinders on and focus solely on making enough money to get by. She saw this same mentality in her janitors — and decided to do something about it.

Dream Big

As in the book, the first participant in the Dream Manager program was a long-time janitor whose dream was to buy a house. Through research, community connections, proper planning and a little financial aid, JANCOA was able to make this dream a reality. This success was able to quash any critics and solidified the importance of the program. Many employees



JANCOA offers its own English as a Second Language classes. The program helps many employees reach their dreams of learning to speak and read English

was a great start, but it wouldn’t be a silver bullet to solve all the problems. Employees had issues other than a lack of transportation that prevented them from getting to work or even staying at JANCOA for more than a short time.

“We thought if we took away some of those other problems in their lives, and improve their quality of life, then maybe they could come to work more often,” says Mary.

Mary knew first-hand what it meant to be in “survival mode.” Years ago as a single mother of three, she lost two jobs in the same year. With no way to pay the

wanted to sign up to share — and reach — their dreams.

Nearly 15 years later, that’s still the case. Since its creation, every staff member has had the opportunity to work with the Dream Manager.

“The Dream Manager program is very much a part of our HR,” says Mary. “Everyone that gets hired knows about our program.”

New hires are given a Dream Manager form and asked what they hope to accomplish in the next three years.

Once dreams are identified, the next steps are building a bond and establish-

ing trust with workers. To break the ice, Dream Manager Candella would bring workers cans of Coke to start a conversation or show up to an account with pizza during a break.

“It’s amazing the conversations you can have over pizza,” quips Mary.

Candella used to spend 40 hours a week interacting with employees, trying to overcome language and culture barriers and forge a relationship.

“I had to engage people five or six times before I established trust,” says Candella. “Once that was accomplished, it began to open doors to more personalized issues.”

Now Candella has transitioned into HR, as well as being Dream Manager. This allows him to meet and interact with new hires as early as their first day.

Whatever the dream, Candella is there to answer questions, point employees in the right direction or provide feedback. JANCOA has stopped offering financial assistance with dreams and Candella won’t do the work for the person, but sometimes all people need is a helping hand and encouragement.

“The ones who really get [the program] walk out their own dreams,” he says. “For example, when they’re closing on a house, they have incredible feelings of success and independence,” knowing they achieved it on their own.

Over the years the Dream Manager program has helped employees earn a GED or college degree, start a small business, adopt a child, stop smoking, learn to speak and read English, or even pursued their “dream” career once leaving JANCOA.

“Everyone wants to feel good about themselves,” says Candella. “And when we do something for employees and treat them as people with talent, amazing things can happen.”

Sometimes the simplest of dreams can be the most impressive. One of Mary’s favorite dream stories is a worker from Nigeria who earned his driver’s license.

“He was so proud of it,” she says. “With a driver’s license he now had the freedom to get outside of the bus lines, which meant he could get a job making more money. His world opened up because he had that license.”

Embracing Turnover

For a lot of employees, their dreams are to have a good job or make more money. Candella alerts them of opportunities that exist at JANCOA, but at the same time, he doesn’t shy away from helping them find a career outside of janitorial. The trade-off is that they’ll work hard and do a good job while still at JANCOA.

While there are employees who’ve been with the company for 10 years or more, the goal is to retain employees for at least three to five years while they pursue their dream and then head out for something different.

For BSCs who struggle with turnover, this may seem oxymoronic, but not to Mary.



JANCOA owners Tony and Mary Miller at the 2011 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year awards

“Nobody holds on to a career anymore,” she says. “The job for a lifetime doesn’t exist, especially in our industry.”

When an average janitor makes \$10 an hour, the odds of him staying at the company for his entire career are slim to none. While it’s true that some janitors can ascend the company ladder and become technicians, supervisors or even upper management, that’s not the case of every employee.

“So instead of fighting [turnover], let’s embrace it,” says Mary.

Mary realized that if they can improve the quality of life for an employee while they work for JANCOA, that person would be even more committed to perform the best job possible. He’ll show up for work, be on time and clean accurately and consistently. There will be fewer mistakes, fewer customer complaints and as a result, longer customer

retention. It’s a win-win situation for both the employee and JANCOA.

“When people are working toward a dream, they come to work with a different attitude,” says Candella. “They’re more motivated.”

Along with this motivation, when janitors stay a minimum of three years — as opposed to three months — they accumulate the experience and knowl-

edge to clean efficiently. These two factors will naturally improve productivity. As a result, janitors at JANCOA clean an average of 7,000 square feet per hour. That’s twice the square footage per hour than the competition and most likely the rest of the country.

In the end, it could be said that the consultant did put Mary and Tony on a path to better cleaning efficiencies.

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Cover Story



Mary loves to share her story and inspire others. She recently presented at the 2014 WFBSC Congress

Boosting productivity and reducing turnover go a long way in keeping costs down, which helps keep the Dream Manager program affordable. While customers appreciate the benefits given to janitors, that doesn't mean they're willing to pay extra for it. Bids still need to be competitive in the marketplace.

But while clients aren't interested in paying for the Dream Manager, they are willing to award contracts for great service, which the program achieves. As a result, business has doubled in the past 10 years.

"The return on investment has really changed our business," says Mary. "We are one of the top three cleaning companies in the greater Cincinnati area."

The company has also

received accolades from the business community. In addition to the aforementioned Best in Biz award, JANCOA was nominated for the 2011 Enquirer Media Top Workplaces Award and 12th Annual Tri-State Family and Private Business Awards.

Mary herself has received the 2010 Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber's Fifth-annual WE Celebrate award and the 2013 YWCA Career Women of Achievement award. She was also a finalist for the 2010 and 2011 Ernst & Young South Central Ohio and Kentucky Entrepreneur of the Year.

Eventually — and by design — employees will leave JANCOA to pursue bigger and better opportunities. But with such recognition as a great place to work, the company has no problem filling vacancies. Through customer and employee referrals there are always worthy candidates waiting for the chance to apply. In fact, for six straight years JANCOA didn't run a job posting. Pretty impressive for a company with a staff that has grown to nearly 400 employees.



Dream Manager Joe Candella (left) has helped hundreds of employees reach their dreams, including Gabriel Ortega

Inspiring Others

From Colorado to South Africa, companies all around the world have been inspired by Kelly's book and the Dream Manager program. Executives have implemented it into their own businesses, helping countless employees better their lives and pursue their dreams.

"It's fascinating to me how many people have personalized and incorporated this little idea that came out of Cincinnati and put their own twist on it and have been successful," says Mary.

Over the years JANCOA has helped hundreds, if not thousands of workers achieve their dreams. Mary's goal is 10 million, but if one adds in all the other companies with their own Dream Manager-inspired programs, she's well on her way to achieving her own dream.

But for every success there's probably another company that lets the program fizzle out. It's not easy to keep the Dream Manager going. So for JANCOA to still run it after nearly 15 years is an amazing accomplishment. Especially given the enormity of staff, of which 70 percent are immigrants or refugees from nearly 25 different countries. The language and culture barriers can be difficult roadblocks for Candella to wade through.

So many dreams can also make it overwhelming and sometimes employing a dream manager isn't enough. It helps to have a champion to keep it going and businesses can look to consultants for help. At JANCOA, they have the original champion — Mary. And she won't stop until employees — new or veteran — achieve their dreams.

"People have to have something to be excited about," she says. "It doesn't matter if you're the janitor at night, the CEO of the cleaning company or the president of the country. You have to have a big dream, figure out a way to go after it and be consistent in doing so." **CP**

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