

# UP YOUR GAME!



## Becoming An All-Star Manager By Erica Shatzer

**No** doubt about it: Being a self-storage manager is a challenging job. There are numerous maintenance and cleaning tasks that require daily attention to keep the facility running smoothly. There are customers who require immediate and top-notch assistance in person, on the telephone, and over the Internet. There are monthly goals to reach, delinquent tenants to contact, and marketing duties to complete. Plus, as if all of these items weren't enough to keep your plate full, there are other important odds and ends such as event planning, community involvement, and learning opportunities.

With such a long to-do list, it can be difficult at times to retain the original motivation and inspiration that accompanied the job offer. Nevertheless, improving your performance should be a priority as both a self-storage manager and an individual.

So how do you find the time and energy to strive to be the best manager you can be? The first step is determining what motivates your desire to excel. Is your motivation driven by a monetary reward such as a bonus or pay raise? Do you have a passion for helping others? Are you hoping your hard work will enable you to advance your career? Regardless of what motivates you, keeping it at the forefront of your mind each day can provide you with the fortitude necessary to put your best foot forward, make good decisions, and handle every task.

### Set Goals

Take a moment to compare your job to running. Motivation is the momentum that keeps you going, whereas goals are the inclines that make you stronger. Realistic goals are essential to

growth as the act of setting goals allows you to recognize areas for improvement. On the flipside, extremely lofty goals are oftentimes unachievable, which is counterproductive to development as it can damage your self-confidence. Accomplishing obtainable goals adds fuel to the fire; therefore, several reasonable goals are preferable to one idealistic goal. Moreover, meeting a goal typically boosts your confidence and provides energy to move on to the next goal.

According to M. Anne Ballard, president of marketing, training, and development services for Atlanta, Ga.-based Universal Storage Group, goals enable managers to progress. "You must have goals in place to improve," she says, adding that she advises managers to set their operational goals at 10 percent better than the previous year.

As a simple example, if your goal was to sell \$1,000 of packing and moving supplies per month in 2015, your target in 2016 should be to sell \$1,100 each month for an increase of 10 percent. The same principle applies to occupancy levels, rental rates, expenses, or any other numeric figure.

Ballard suggests also that managers take an active role in establishing and adhering to the facility's budget. "If you don't have a budget, make one," she says, adding that it's impossible to achieve better results without a budget in place to use as a guide. "Be sure to add 10 percent to last year's expenses."

Of course, don't forget to track your progress. You will never know if you have met or exceeded your goal if you don't monitor your efforts on a weekly or monthly basis. Ballard reminds managers to keep a close watch on key performance indicators as well. The number of calls a facility receives, the number of walk-in customers, the number of website hits, the amount of drive-by traffic, and how many leads are converted to rentals are all important to the

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facility's overall success. If the property is experiencing lower than average traffic, make drumming up business a priority.

### Live To Learn

In addition to setting goals, taking on more responsibilities and pursuing new challenges are two other ways to grow as

order to better their performance tend to be successful storage managers. He also emphasizes that managers should learn how to analyze the various reports in order to "react quicker to produce increased revenues."

While challenges come in many forms, leading and/or teaching others within a

with Pogoda. "Take on challenges," he says. "Ask for a struggling store as an opportunity for growth."

Carol Mixon-Krendl, president and owner of Tucson, Ariz.-based SkilCheck Services, Inc., has had several managers switch locations to keep them motivated and successful. She says that managing a different facility helped those managers regain their focus as they were serving new clients in a new area with different demographics and different issues. "Managers have to love the area and the demographics," says Mixon-Krendl. "That's important to keeping managers happy."

Another more obvious technique for becoming a better manager is to complete additional training and pursue educational opportunities. And within the industry there is no shortage of information available for self-storage managers. For starters, the Self Storage Association (SSA), many of the state storage associations, and even many self-storage companies hold conferences, trade shows, seminars, and webinars. There are plenty of other educational resources and training programs available as well.

"Educate yourself during down times," says Ballard. "Keep up with the industry, and get as much information and training as possible. Talk to vendors, read the publications, and access data online." She also recommends that managers be active in their state associations to take advantage of the networking events and to stay up to date on industry trends. At the same time, seasoned managers may want to consider brushing up on the basics for a refresher.

On another note, over time people can become complacent within a position. Thus, it's always beneficial to continuously look for ways to liven up your work environment. For example, you could re-write your phone script, attend sales/marketing seminars for some new ideas, implement a unique facility event, or start training for a career advancement.

"Keep it fun and fresh," says Ballard. "Make every day a reason for customers to come see you."

### Know The Competition

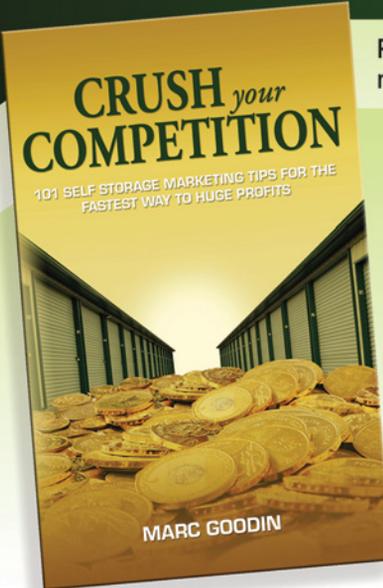
Similar to setting goals and remaining current on industry trends, knowing your

a self-storage manager. Maurice Pogoda, president of Farmington Hills, Mich.-based Pogoda Companies, recommends that managers seek out new challenges in order to expand their knowledge. "The best employees are those who take the initiative to learn more on their own," he says, adding that people who take the lead and want to learn more in

company is a practical practice that allows managers to use their knowledge, gain experience, and develop new skills. As for taking on more responsibility, Pogoda suggests managing multiple properties or moving to a facility that is either larger or struggling.

Joel Keaton, senior vice president of national operations at CubeSmart, agrees

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competition is a surefire way to become a better manager. First of all, being familiar with your competition's prices, features, and benefits creates a competitive edge in regards to selling. However, it can allow for personal growth as well since shopping the competition gives you first-hand insight into how those facility managers conduct business. A self-storage manager who is friendlier or more knowledgeable than you can inspire you to improve. For example, how would you react to a manager who greeted you at the door with a smile, handshake, and an ice cold bottle of water on a hot summer day? If you were overwhelmingly impressed by his/her friendly and kind demeanor, you probably need to up your game. Conversely, you may not be wowed by his/her actions if you normally do all of those things plus hold the door open for customers.

As Keaton puts it, managers should strive to "provide unique customer experiences" and "enjoy taking care of

customers". He adds that the goal of CubeSmart's managers is to "surprise and delight each customer", which the company teaches through its "wow program"—an educational employee course dedicated to exceeding customers' expectations.

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Therefore, the example above illustrates how knowing another manager's disposition can spur personal growth. Moreover, managers should take pride in what they do and ownership of the facility they manage. "Think of the store as your business," he says. "Treat it as your business and look at it as a profit center."

Speaking of profits, knowing the competition can be beneficial to your facility's bottom line as well. Although referred to as the competition, the facilities in your local area should be seen as allies. As a matter of fact, Ballard encourages her managers to "get out to meet and greet with competitors" for two priceless reasons: referrals and market knowledge. Ongoing referral programs with the competition can result in long-term tenants, positive experiences, and, of course, increased occupancy and income. And friendly relationships with other facility managers promotes the exchange of market information, which can help every facility in the area increase revenue through rental rates.

**Favor Feedback**

Once you have completed all of the previously mentioned items, don't forget to ask your supervisors for feedback. While reports can show whether you have met your goals based on numbers, they cannot

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## The Eyes Have It!

As a self-storage manager, you already know that you have only one chance to make a first impression. And the reality is that your appearance and the facility's appearance can influence a customer's first impression.

"Take a good look in the mirror," says Ballard, who encourages her managers to photograph every aspect the facilities they manage as it enables them to see the sites from the customer's perspective. In addition, other industry professionals have recommended driving by the facility at various times of the day to ensure that no daytime/nighttime issues exist.

In order to stay presentable and establish a good visual impression, here are several general upkeep tips:

### Personal

- Wear clean, wrinkle-free clothing that fits well.
- Keep your hands and nails clean for pleasant handshakes.
- Keep your hair tidy and facial hair trimmed/well-groomed.
- Don't wear too many accessories or too much perfume.
- Keep makeup to a minimum and use natural shades.
- Always wear a smile—in person and when speaking on the telephone.

### Facility

- Keep office desk and reception area organized and free of clutter.
- Keep the parking lot, halls, and floors free of debris.
- Keep the restrooms clean and stocked.
- Keep the landscaping tidy and fresh.
- Keep up to date on all routine maintenance.
- Keep the retail area stocked and orderly.
- Keep the sidewalks swept, the floors mopped, and rugs/mats vacuumed.

provide suggestions for improvements or alternative ways to reach your objectives. "Ask for direction," says Mixon-Krendl.

Here's an example: The report that details how many telephone leads were converted to rentals states that you had only five conversions in July. However, the total number of phone calls for that month wasn't lower than normal. The report offers no explanation as to why you were unable to turn more leads into rentals. After discussing the disappointing numbers with your supervisor and reviewing a few of the recorded calls, it becomes clear that a discount special that started at the end of June seemed to confuse the callers. Although it wasn't obvious to you at the time of the calls, reviewing the situation brought the issue to light. As you can see, feedback can be a wonderful tool for short- and long-term improvements.

What's more, you should be giving your supervisors feedback as well. "Managers should be vocal about their needs," Mixon-Krendl says. "Owners and supervisors want to help managers be happy." She adds that formerly unhappy managers have remained with her company by voicing their dissatisfactions with specific facilities; they were relocated to other storage properties where they now thrive.

Elaborating on the feedback notion, Mixon-Krendl recalls a few instances when she had to terminate good employees who wouldn't have lost their jobs if they had been honest and upfront about their personal problems. In one case, a manager had been borrowing money from petty cash to fund bus trips in search of his missing daughter. "Had he told me what was going on, I would have helped him," she says.

To sum it up: If you have an issue, personal or professional, don't let it fester to the point where it interferes with your work performance. "Don't make hasty decisions," adds Mixon-Krendl, who suggests always clearing the air beforehand. "Sometimes you just need to vent."

### Find A Balance

At the end of the day, creating a balance between your work life and your home life may be one of the most positive ways to

improve your performance. Having a good work-life balance enables managers to be more productive as they are less stressed and well rested. On the other end of that scale, a long-term imbalance between work and life can cause burnout and job dissatisfaction.

As a former resident manager, Keaton can attest that managers need to separate work from home. However, he says that can be tricky because "you're usually better off solving customers' problems immediately".

Nevertheless, Mixon-Krendl is adamant that resident managers should take breaks to get away from the site. "Resident managers, especially, need to find a balance between work and life," she says, adding that vacations are necessary and resident managers shouldn't worry that the facility will fall apart in their absence.

"They should be passing tasks onto other reliable staff," says Mixon-Krendl, "and training staff to know all the procedures. Assistant managers should know as much as the manager and be able to run the office."

Here are a few other tips for creating a better work-life balance:

- Unplug from technology.
- Exercise often, eat well, and get enough sleep.
- Limit time-wasting activities.
- Find ways to make your life easier/more efficient.
- Make time to relax.

### Stay Positive!

Above all, keep in mind that a positive attitude is essential to your success. A positive outlook can make a tribulation less daunting and give you confidence in the face of uncertainty. Moreover, positive thinking may provide health benefits, such as reduced stress levels, increased life span, and greater resistance to the common cold, so you can more thoroughly enjoy your job as the best self-storage manager! 

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*Erica Shatzer is the editor of Mini-Storage Messenger, Self-Storage Now!, and Self-Storage Canada.*