Re-Visioning: Environmental Services for Cleaning and Restoration Contractors

by
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Sometimes we just have to dream and think of a better tomorrow so that one day it may come true.

My current dream regarding environmental services for cleaning and restoration contractors comes from some very awake conversations rather than from peaceful slumber. When leading a recent mold refresher course we did a brief introduction of students where I asked them to share not only their name and company but also the types of services they provide and a summary of some of their relevant training. As more and more information came forth I was struck by both the diversity of environment related services as well as the incredible range of educational programs that the students had experienced.

The body of knowledge represented by the people in that class crystallized two concepts that I had been mulling over for quite a while:

1. The environmental work that we do on a whole range of projects in the cleaning and restoration field can be summarized as identifying and removing microscopic contaminants.
2. There is a core set of skills that are necessary to deal with any type of small particulate, and some specialized knowledge that is required for each specific material.

Size Does Matter!

The cleaning portion of restoration is easily divided into two subcategories: cleaning the dirt we can see and removing the stuff that we cannot see. For example, in the construction industry it is still fairly common to have contracts that say that the work site must be left "broom clean". This is often interpreted as meaning that the construction area is to be left free of visible debris, although, many times even a light coating of dust is considered acceptable. However, for most environmental work broom clean or dust free is just a start, not an ending point. After the remediation efforts are completed a detailed visual inspection is followed by some form of quality assurance testing. This process makes sense as environmental remediation usually involves microscopic contaminants in the form of one or more of the following:

- Asbestos fibers
- Lead particles
- Illicit drug residue
- Mold
- Soot/fire residue
- Infectious agents such as viruses and bacteria
- Trauma scene residue (which may also include gory visible contamination)

- Teargas residue
- Fugitive dust from nanoparticle manufacturing
- Bird droppings or other animal residue
- Dust mites and their feces
- General indoor air particulates such as skin cells, printer and copy machine toner residue, fiberglass shed from HVAC liners, and the like

Although each of these materials has different properties and causes different health concerns, the thing that ties them all together is that after cleaning gross debris you are left with residue that cannot be seen with the unaided eye. This commonality between seemingly disparate environmental concerns is the key to re-visioning how we approach preparing individuals for environmental work.

Building on a Base of Common Skills

When the varied properties of different contaminants are put aside in favor of the more generic description of microscopic contaminants, then a new approach to education immediately becomes obvious. Basic skill sets are necessary for dealing with any such hazard. Regardless of the particular contaminant, a cleaning and restoration crew addressing microscopic particles must understand and apply skills related to:

- Isolation
- Dust control using negative pressure and air scrubbing
- Surface and personnel decontamination
- Personal protective equipment
- Dust free demolition
- Detailed cleaning

These skills should form the core of any effective training for remediation of environmental hazards – and indeed they do. OSHA-mandated training for asbestos, EPA-required contractor training for lead paint, industry-approved classes for mold remediation, and healthcare-mandated training for infection control all integrate these fundamental concepts as a substantial portion of the instruction.

A More Efficient Approach

The substantial duplication in current training programs not only wastes time and money but is likely to cast such a pall over the courses for an experienced individual that they may miss the key elements that define a particular educational program. Rather than mind-numbing repetition training agencies, industry associations, and even government regulators should design courses for restoration contractors that take advantage of a core skill set and then focus on the particulars that are vital to successfully remediating a specific hazard.

One Small Example to Light the Way

While many training programs are currently locked into standardized formats by federal or state regulations or entrenched business interests, there are a few areas where this new thinking can be applied even now. As the scourge of meth cooking advances across the

country from the west coast, individual states and communities are left to struggle with the proper approach to identifying qualified contractors who can address homes and other structures that have been contaminated by the residue and byproducts of this illegal compound. Although a minority of states have detailed regulations regarding contractor training (usually 3-5 days of training, oftentimes involving many HAZWOPER concepts that have little or nothing to do with the task at hand), in many areas those wishing to perform such remediation are only given vague instructions that they must have "appropriate" training. For organizations and individuals in such situations Wonder Makers works to identify their existing level of skills and then offer appropriately detailed classes. For groups that have previous training in the core skills we can often provide an intensive one-day Meth Lab Clean-up training program. However, if the contractor is coming from a segment of the industry where isolating the work areas, using HEPA filtered equipment, and wearing personal protective equipment is not standard practice, then we institute an integrated three-day class that develops those skills with a focus on applying them to illicit drug labs.

So the dream is alive! Perhaps bit by bit others will come to understand that mandated training of redundant concepts not only saps money and enthusiasm from the best and the brightest in the business, but it fails to prepare people to adapt core skills so that they can successfully deal with the hazards of the future.