

Cardinal's KISMET

How Jim DeGrado, president of Cardinal Building Maintenance, helped his company realize its green cleaning destiny

By Lisa Ridgely, Deputy Editor



DESTINY. The word came up more than once during a visit with Jim DeGrado, owner of Cardinal Building Maintenance Inc., in Alsip, Ill. It was destiny, he believes, that put the process in place for his company to support an ambitious services program offering a strict green cleaning regimen for all customers.

He combined his qualified management, a valued advisor, solid customer relationships and decades of industry experience with a booming green building market to create a recipe for growth and success.

For Cardinal, success starts and ends with a company culture of integrity.

"Integrity starts from our foundation — that you actively provide what it is you're being paid for," DeGrado says. "If you're able to give your customers that foundation, anything is possible."

No matter what one believes about predetermined courses of events, or whether it's called destiny, fate, fortune or kismet, DeGrado believes it has played a part in his success and in forging the path forward with a comprehensive green program.

Humble beginnings

DeGrado started working with his father as a window washer after giving college a try and deciding it wasn't a good fit. Soon after, he joined with a few acquaintances to start a cleaning company, and years later, DeGrado struck out on his own with Cardinal Building Maintenance.

By the time veteran industry consultant Barney Gershen heard from him a few years ago, DeGrado had more than 30 years of experience under his belt.

But after reading an article Gershen wrote, something compelled DeGrado to give him a call and discuss how Cardinal could move to the next level of success and growth.

The two struck up a partnership that has helped Cardinal grow — despite the recession — thanks to a willingness to change and delegate.

"Jim's very open, and that's really a key part of it: the leader of the organization has to realize that he's both the solution and the problem," Gershen says. "He's the solution because the leader has taken it to this level of success and been very successful. He's also the problem, because if you want to go to the next level, you're going to have to change."

With the help of Gershen, DeGrado decided to take on a huge commitment to establishing expertise in the U.S.

The Cardinal Building Maintenance team of LEED experts, from left: Marketing & Sales Associate Tim Wagner, VP of Sales Kirsten Uzzardo, President Jim DeGrado and General Manager Rodney Reams

Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program.

LEED offers a handful of accreditations for professionals in specialties such as building design and construction, interior design and construction, operations and maintenance, homes and neighborhood development. Few BSCs in the U.S. have a LEED Accredited Professional (AP) on staff. Those that do are seeking to be an information resource and advisor for customers and prospects that are LEED certified or looking to be.

In 2009, the USGBC began offering an additional certification that serves as a first step on the path to being a LEED professional: Green Associate.

DeGrado decided to start two of his employees, Marketing and Sales Associate Tim Wagner and Vice President of Sales Kirsten Uzzardo, on the LEED Green Associate path, and earlier this year, the two received the credential.

"We had operations in place that were adhering to LEED concepts and LEED facilities," Wagner says. "It was an extension of that that the next step was to become LEED green associates."

To Wagner, it made a lot of sense to start with the GA designation.

"It covers more for a building service contractor," he says. "It has a lot more effort and concentration on the green aspects of building design. You actually have to take both exams regardless, so when you're going for an AP you have to take the green associate test as well. So it's kind of just a new stepping stone that the USGBC put together to encourage education and becoming more familiar with LEED."

Whether customers are in LEED-certified facilities or not, they are entering into a green partnership with Cardinal when they sign a contract.

"The specs aren't very different here," compared to a non-LEED account, DeGrado explains, while walking through the hallways of one of his LEED-New Construction (NC) accounts, an insurance agency called The Horton Group. "We are not differentiating cleaning; it's the same plan. The entire approach is the same."

That approach is guided by employee development, use of certified green products and equipment, sustainability initiatives and Diversey's Healthy

High Performance Cleaning (HHPC) program, which focuses specifically on helping BSCs earn LEED points in partner facilities.

The impetus for moving toward a green-focused program of services was that, over the course of a number of years, LEED-certified buildings were becoming more and more popular in the Chicago area.

The market was changing, DeGrado sensed, and he wanted his company to be ahead of the curve.

"Customers were either remodeling and going for LEED-Existing Buildings, or they were building a new portion of their facility to be LEED — or they were building brand new facilities that they wanted to get the certification for," DeGrado says.

Practicing green cleaning and having LEED expertise is the right thing to do right now, Wagner says.

"We wanted to learn more about how we could benefit from what's going on in terms of the environment, just because of

the type of industry that we're in — and then translating that information and that knowledge and that new way of thinking into how it can benefit our business and service our customers better," Wagner says.

With Gershen on Cardinal's team, it seemed the stars were aligning to start moving toward becoming a regional leader in green cleaning.

Pedal to the metal

Cardinal now services four LEED-certified accounts, including LEED-EBOM and LEED-NC facilities. While the LEED expertise Cardinal has gained is invaluable for prospecting, the LEED journey thus far has been embarked upon in correlation with current customers.

"It was fortunate that they were ahead of the curve," says Scott Crumrine, director of capital projects for Harvey, Ill.-based Atkore International, which earned LEED-Core and Shell (CS) Gold certification last year — thanks in part to its partnership with Cardinal. "It was good timing."

One analogy Wagner uses to explain how Cardinal can help customers is that the company's LEED expertise "pushes the foot on the pedal to being LEED-certified."

A BSC that can help accelerate a facility's certification process is going to be an invaluable member of the LEED team.

The Atkore facility, Allied Tube & Conduit, added more than 500,000 square feet of manufacturing and distribution space to its existing headquarters with the LEED project. The company manufactures steel tubing and piping, electrical conduit, armored wire and cable and metal building components.

Cleaning is the last thing a facility might have on its mind when going for LEED certification, Crumrine says, so it was comforting to have a nice partnership with Cardinal and its knowledgeable staff.

Most new building projects are going to be considering becoming LEED certified in some way, Wagner says.

"You're not going to see new buildings going up without seeing them address this for long-term sustainability and profitability and cost-savings," Wagner says.

The idea of "service" is front-of-mind in everything that Cardinal provides,

going beyond just the physical aspects of green cleaning.

"It's standard operating procedures, how you clean, when you clean, where you store materials, how they're stored, how they're transported, how you dilute your chemicals," Wagner says. "There are so many different ways you can play into this new world. ... There's just so many different aspects to it that we have to be aware of in complying with customers. It's very extensive but we're really in a comfortable spot right now."

Truly different

Expanding a LEED-focused services menu to all customers is just one way for Cardinal to attract and retain clients.

"We always talk about this: if you're not on the bus you're going to get hit by the bus," DeGrado says. "So everyone's going to be competing for these same kinds of accounts and you have to have this background pretty much across the board now. When you're getting RFPs on your desk, you've got to be able to differentiate yourself from another competitor."

Green cleaning has become so common that to say it's a differentiator anymore is false, DeGrado says.

Gershen agrees, saying companies need to put that expertise to broader use to truly stand out.

"It used to be a real market differentiator," he says. "Now, it's become almost as if everybody has it so what degree you actually put it to use becomes your differentiator."

There are many different ways that a cleaning company can be involved in the LEED process, Wagner says, ranging from chemicals all the way to providing pest management plans.

"They are continually updating of how to provide support to these facilities. It is ever-changing," he says.

Laying groundwork for green

Even LEED expertise in the form of staff who are LEED GAs or LEED APs is going to become more common, so Cardinal's approach includes a rigorous devotion to a number of best practices.

The most important of those is communication, DeGrado says — which of

course facilitates every LEED certification process and is the foundation for every customer partnership.

"Communication really is the key to being successful," he says. "My goal from the beginning has been to make sure communication is the best it can be. We're not on autopilot."

The cornerstone of the communications plan is the Quality Satisfaction Review (QSR), which is provided for many of Cardinal's larger customers. QSRs are face-to-face meetings during which DeGrado

and/or other management team employees meet with customers' leadership personnel to evaluate all communication that has taken place since the beginning of the partnership or the last QSR.

"When you bring this to people, the ones who will participate, then you start to develop the relationship based on the information we provided. It creates a bonding concept," DeGrado says.

Those customers who have an interest in or commitment to LEED are more willing to enter into a heavily communicative partnership, he adds.

Positioned for success

With about 700 employees, Cardinal is poised to continue to grow as an emerging regional leader in green cleaning and LEED expertise. Uzzardo is continuing her LEED studies and plans to become a LEED AP, while two additional staffers are going to become green associates.

"We have established the value proposition that makes us very competitive, that makes us able to compete not only against companies that are about our size in terms of our scope and coverage area — but also against some of the national and worldwide organizations that can't provide this type of familiar service, where you see a CEO sitting across from you at the table," Wagner says. "So we're trying to get as caught up to all the big boys as well and still provide the same level of service."

As the number of LEED-certified buildings increases exponentially every year, it's just common sense to Cardinal's staff to continue pursuing LEED education. That kind of information and measurement tools can be used for any customer as something simple yet different that can be provided as a value, Wagner says.

To Gershen, this is the perfect time to apply what many feel is the right way to conduct business to a market that is hungry for green initiatives.

"The market has to value it before you can present it to customers and expect them to really buy into it. But now you're finding that the customers are demanding it," he says. "It used to be the icing on the cake and now it's part of the cake. You've got to have parts of this institutionalized in your organization or you don't even make it to the table anymore." □



Servicing LEED Facilities:

For an inside look at two of Cardinal's LEED-certified customer facilities, visit www.cleanlink.com/video



Cardinal services The Horton Group, a LEED-NC certified building in Orland Park, Ill.



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