

Fostering a Learning Culture

Third-party management companies use training to ensure consistent high performance.

By Mark Wright

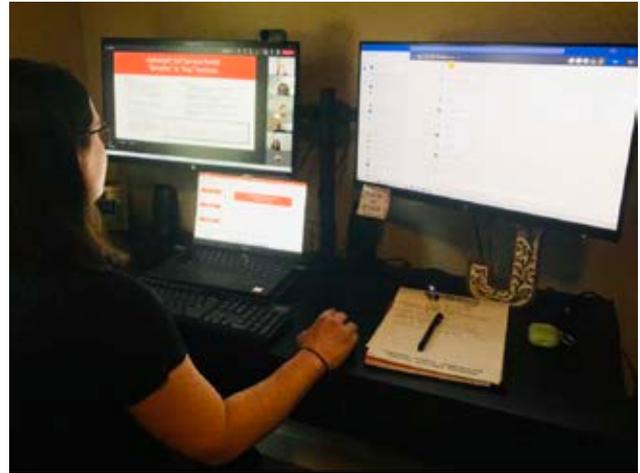
Providing a well-designed, continually updated training experience for managers and other staff can be a struggle for time-challenged independent owners and small operators. That's one reason the Self Storage Association offers its Certified Self Storage Manager (CSSM) program. But it's also why some third-party management companies go out of their way to educate employees throughout their facilities.

In fact, Christina Rita, chief operating officer of StoragePRO Management in Walnut Creek, California, said recruiting and retaining employees keeps independent operators up at night and added that the recent Great Resignation trend has increased that anxiety level.

"Independent owners worry and stress over who will replace their manager who's been with them for 20 years that's now retired," Rita said. "Where do they get them from? And how do they go about training this new employee they hired? It's a big part of what we do, and why independent owners will come to third-party [management] for how you hire and retain people."

Of course, some third-party management companies also own facilities. That's the case with The William Warren Group Inc., which owns facilities under its own brand as well as offering third-party management through its StorQuest Self Storage company.

Above: Justina Kempfski, training specialist at Absolute Storage Management, assists with a remote Day 1 Orientation for new hires.



"Our training doesn't differ between our managed and owned facilities," explained Gary Sugarman, chief operating officer at The William Warren Group in Santa Monica, California. "All of our managers are provided with the same guidance, materials, content and resources."

Sugarman added that over the last few years, the company has reimagined its "training vision to create a true 'general manager' mindset with every employee regardless of their level of experience. This has resulted in higher-level performance and greater accountability across the board, as there is significantly more shared knowledge among our store teams."

"It's establishing a culture of learning and curiosity that is a shared vision with our district managers as senior leaders who are as passionate as our executive team about creating an environment where we can provide world-class guest service through high levels of engagement with our team members who are interacting with our guests each day," Sugarman said.

All Styles Are Different

Every company has its own approach to training. Absolute Storage Management Inc. (ASM), headquartered in Memphis, Tennessee, has a two-person training department that splits its focus based on employee tenure, said Carrie Holbert, human resources manager.

"We conduct our own training for all of the facilities we manage," said Holbert. "The training manager focuses on training and ongoing

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development for current team members who have been with the company 90+ days. The other trainer is focused on new hires who have been on the job for up to 90 days, and assists with training for all team members as needed.”

Holbert said new ASM team members complete three days of virtual training. Day One is an orientation focusing mainly on HR-related topics, such as benefits, safety, general conduct and policies, compensation and logistics, and employee portal and time-clock systems. It also includes an introduction to the company with



StoragePRO Management team members participate in a training session.

videos from the executive team describing ASM’s history and culture. The second and third days focus solely on operational training, including rental software, incidents, opening-and-closing procedures and marketing.

“The remainder of their training is a combination of hands-on training and shadowing with their team member at their properties for two full weeks,” said Holbert.

Rita said StoragePRO outsourced a lot of its training in the very beginning, but long ago moved

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Resources for Continuous Learning

SSA Online University

The Self Storage Association’s Online University is a multimedia online education and training center for self storage managers and owners. It offers convenient distance learning that saves time and the expense of travel.

The Online University consists of:

- ◆ Legal webinar events
- ◆ Recordings, videos and presentations from SSA educational sessions
- ◆ The Manager Certification Program and Certified Self Storage Manager (CSSM) designation

WEBSITE: selfstorage.org/Events-Education/Online-University

KONU

Tim O’Brien’s company provides “bespoke development support for both people and their organizations,” focusing on leadership development for executives and other leaders, and programs for mission-driven organizations that want or need to change.

WEBSITE: konu.org

Dale Carnegie

Founded in 1912, the original Dale Carnegie Course used then-new techniques to instill self confidence and help people dispel their fear of public speaking. Dale Carnegie penned the famous book “How to Win Friends and Influence People,” published in 1936. Over the decades, the company expanded its course offerings and achieved accreditation by the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (ACCET).

WEBSITE: dalecarnegie.com

Association for Talent Development

Based in Alexandria, Virginia, ATD serves talent development managers, trainers, instructional designers, performance consultants, frontline managers, workplace learning professionals, and others who help employees achieve their full potential by improving their knowledge, skills, and abilities in the workplace. ATD’s members come from 120+ countries and work in organizations of all sizes and in all industry sectors.

WEBSITE: td.org

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it all in house, creating StoragePRO University. She said all new employees go through two to three weeks of initial training, which includes side-by-side courses, videos and other elements.

"And then we have continuing education for everyone throughout their career here," Rita said. "Training is what helps keep the employees engaged, keeps them abreast of the business and what's going on, and helps them continue to evolve and potentially grow into the next position."

She said continual training ensures consistency at every StoragePRO-managed property.

"We want all the employees to really understand the business model of the StoragePRO way," she explained.

Sugarman said new William Warren Group hires go through an in-depth overview of the company's systems and focuses on achieving mastery within the first seven days of training. They also cover regulatory requirements and safety

content "pretty heavily within the first week of on-boarding a new employee."

Sugarman said that initial seven-day concentrated period of learning hasn't changed much over time. What has changed, he said, is the company adopted an "always be learning mentality" where training never stops.

"We regularly recognize and reinforce excellent execution and use each 'opportunity' we can as a coaching moment," he explained. "We have put a lot of stock into mastering our processes and making sure our employees understand the 'why' behind everything we do."

An Evolving Process

As much as that continuous-learning expectation applies to employees of these companies, all three also walk their talk when it comes to changing with the times. When asked how their training today differs from, say, five years ago, all

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could point to examples of training innovation within their organizations.

At ASM, said Holbert, the general manager for the area used to come and spend five days with a new hire and run through a checklist of training topics. But the duration of training has increased over time.

“About a year ago, the required training for new hires became 20 weeks for approximately 80 hours, even for part-time team members,” she said. “We have noticed a huge improvement in turnover and feedback about training and [team members] feeling supported during their first few weeks with us.”

ASM also implemented a “learning management system” to support its ongoing training needs.

At The William Warren Group, Sugarman cited training changes focused on customer service.

“The key difference from five years ago,” he said, “is that we place a significant value in situational awareness training, teaching and training on cues to provide excellent guest service day in and day out, along with a huge focus on understanding empathy and how to manage through each guest situation in the unique ways our store managers will be called on to do.”

Sugarman said his company accomplishes that “by doing significant ‘inter-district’ coaching and training where established and seasoned managers have regular and frequent conversations with new hires.”



Teresa Rosa, hiring and on-boarding HR specialist at Absolute Storage Management, remotely conducts a Day 1 Orientation for new hires in Mississippi, Florida, Ohio and Georgia.

At StoragePRO Management, Rita said, “Over the years we’ve built upon our training model, and it just continues to get better and better.”

That model touches every level of the company, she explained. Rita said that she, the executive team, and the district managers “are always attending courses.”

For example, she said the entire operations management team and in-house call center attended a monthly, year-long Dale Carnegie course last year. And the sales team has attended classes by Tim O’Brien, a partner with KONU and a lecturer at the Harvard Kennedy School (see sidebar for more).

The quality of training “is a big reason why people stay — or don’t stay — with a company, in my opinion,” said Rita. “Knowledge is power.” ♦



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