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First Realty Management's investment in training and education adds immeasurable value for clients

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All property management firms are not created equal. That's why choosing a managing agent based exclusively on the lowest fee is rarely the most cost effective approach to finding the right company to meet a property's particular requirements, whether it's a multifamily rental, condominium association, or an office or retail location.

The level and value of the resources and services a company brings to its clients are the most reliable indicators of future performance and client satisfaction. Well-trained and qualified employees are the infrastructure that supports and defines how well a service-based, or any other company, operates.

Today's property manager needs a broad range of hard and soft skills. Hands-on skills in functions such as computer software, finance, budgeting, physical maintenance, plumbing, electrical, "green" and energy conservation initiatives, landscaping, insurance, contracting, fair housing, building codes, and capital improvements are just some of the "nuts and bolts" requirements. How to be effective in all these disciplines requires an added layer of "softer," interdependent skills, for example: time management, goal-setting, loss prevention and liability, dealing with difficult people and situations, and general organizational, communication and administrative techniques.

At First Realty Management, training and education of staff have long been a tradition, dating back over 60 years to when its founder earned his doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The company began developing minimum training/experience standards decades ago. For example, all management, leasing, maintenance, construction specialists and resident services personnel were required to be nationally certified in fair housing. Those working in the affordable sector were required to obtain professional occupancy compliance certification as well. The company was among the first in the industry to establish an in-house group of professional specialists in marketing, communication, human resources, risk management, purchasing and contracting, all of whom interact one-on-one with managers to advise and share expertise in their various specialties.

In addition to investing in the programs, classes and designations offered by industry and trade groups such as IREM, CAI, NAHMA, and Spectrum, First Realty has developed a comprehensive internal professional development program. A curriculum committee, made up of the chief financial and operating officers, vice presidents, regional managers, marketing and leasing director, human resources director and licensed construction supervisors, all provide input.

Several years ago I set in motion an internal effort to identify and evaluate employees' current skills at all levels of the company. Training programs were then structured to accommodate differences in job requirements and learning style. There is no such thing as one size fits all when it comes to employee training and learning retention. To remain effective, training must be nimble, easily

accessible and deliverable in the field, with learning approaches continually updated.

First Realty covers the basics through industry and structured in-house training on regulatory changes and compliance issues. Employee and property safety, health and wellness incentives are ongoing, together with regularly scheduled workgroup meetings. For example, condominium managers meet regularly to share information and review the company's operations manual of standardized policies and procedures for virtually every aspect of association management.

Maintenance, assistant managers, and other groups also get together for regular information exchanges and training workshops provided in-house or by vendors or outside professionals on topics such as lead paint, hazmat training, asbestos and emergency remediation protocols, and softer subjects such as safe lifting or interacting with frail or elderly residents. The company also utilizes speakers and educational resources from its Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and has conducted a series of in-house training sessions to enhance managers' supervisory, written and verbal communication skills, as well.

In recent years, training has been formalized and expanded for the maintenance staff. In addition to requirements that every member of the staff be OSHA and fair housing certified, on site technicians are required to obtain the National Accredited Housing Maintenance Superintendent or Technician designations. First Realty had one of the largest groups in the country to earn these industry designations.

First Realty employees participate in web based training through a variety of providers and organizations. The company has also established an ongoing relationship with the Grace Hill web-based Apartment Management Learning Centers, whereby all employees are required to successfully complete courses geared toward their specific job responsibilities in property management.

They are tested on their knowledge before and after classes, with results reported back to company officers at the top of the reporting chain. This helps to ensure that every employee serving the company's clients is not only knowledgeable and well-qualified to perform every function of his or her position, but is also building the skills needed to function at a consistently higher level.

In a service industry such as property management, training is the most strategic investment a company can make in meeting the needs of its present and future clients. It is at the core of the value-added approach First Realty Management brings to every client it serves. Out of over 200 participating management companies and over a million apartment homes, First Realty was recognized with a "Top 5" National Award in the 2013 SatisFacts resident survey program.

First Realty Management is an Accredited Management Organization with over 60 years experience in managing every type of property, from award-winning affordable tax credit and mixed use apartment developments to world class luxury condominium associations. The company currently manages some 74 condominium and rental communities totaling over 7,000 residences, in addition to a growing portfolio of retail and office locations.

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