1330 Buffalo Road, Rochester, NY 14626
585-413-0574
www.DocsFS.com

First Night Nightmare

What a New Build Taught Me About Contracts, Courage, and Carafes

Episode 102

I'll never forget the night I learned how expensive assumptions can be.

I'd been promoted and handed one of my first big startup cleans: a brand-new facility—massive, shiny, and supposedly ready for a final clean over the weekend before Monday's grand opening. We rolled in with auto scrubbers, restroom carts, chemicals—everything dialed in. The plan was tight. The staffing was set. The schedule was crisp. And then reality hit.

There were no custodial closets. None. No slop sinks. No water access where we needed it. No storage for paper products or equipment. The blueprints we'd been given included closets, but in the final design, they were eliminated to "maximize rentable square footage." Translation: we were expected to clean a colossal building without the most basic infrastructure required to do the job.

The Nightmare of No Water

Do you know how we filled a 25-gallon auto scrubber that night? Coffee carafes. Those old Bunn coffee machines that were hard plumbed into break rooms became our lifeline. We shuffled those little pitchers back and forth like we were fueling a moon mission with thimbles. It was a farce—and a costly one. My bosses were not happy, and neither was my crew. But we got the job done. After that, it was someone else's problem to handle the billing and communications with the client. Those are the perks of being an employee. If that's you, do your employer and yourself a favor. Read the rest of this and make yourself as valuable an asset as possible. For my fellow owners, allow me to share how this has impacted my preparation for new accounts and special projects.

How Nightmares Serve You

That night did more than wreck a budget; it reshaped how I do business.

Here's the lesson: assumptions are not resources. If water, power, storage, and disposal locations aren't explicitly guaranteed, you have a choice. You can hope or you can plan as if they don't exist. And if they don't exist, neither does your profitability.

Asking for Help in the Middle of a Nightmare Service

I called everyone up the chain that night—VP, Ops director, the client. I made it crystal clear that we showed up ready to perform. But without essential resources, the scope was fundamentally altered. My bosses questioned me at first. You would likely have asked your on-site that same questions. Neither one of us was comfortable. After I was clear that my superiors knew the situation, we got to work. As a supervisor I knew the next 2 nights would be a challenge. But I had zero perspective on how this looked from an owner's perspective. Years later, as a commercial cleaning company owner and coach, this lesson is invaluable.

Breach of Contract

That weekend, so many years ago, constituted a breach of contract. My bosses brought it to the client as such. Not because I wanted to be combative, but because it's the only professional path forward. You can't quietly "eat it" and expect to survive in this industry. If you're new and it feels intimidating to take that stance, trust me—nothing builds backbone faster than paying out of pocket for someone else's oversight. If you are concerned with how to handle these and other business challenges in commercial cleaning, contact me here. My consulting clients are hardworking, industrious people. And I enjoy helping them succeed!

Experience taught me to hardwire these protections into every agreement:

- Access to water. Not "there's a faucet somewhere," but designated slop sinks per floor or per X square feet, with compatible fittings for filling and dumping equipment.
- Power availability. Confirm live power for auto scrubbers, vacuums, and battery charging stations.
- Secure storage. A lockable room large enough for equipment, paper goods, chemicals, and consumables—clearly assigned and accessible from Day 1.
- Wastewater disposal. Approved locations for dumping with environmental compliance in mind. Dumping in the wrong place can create violations you'll own if you're not careful.
- Pre-start punch list. A signed checklist confirming the building is "clean-ready"—dust settled, construction debris removed, surfaces accessible, elevators functional, and HVAC running.

When any of those are missing, the path is simple: document, communicate, and renegotiate. I put it in writing: we arrived as scheduled, we were ready to perform, and due to missing resources, additional costs and time now apply. It's not aggressive—it's professional clarity.

If you're taking over a new facility and you have any nagging questions, here's the quick-start process I swear by:

- Do a pre-walk with the client 72–96 hours before your first clean. Test fill-and-dump locations. Find outlets. Verify storage access and keys.
- Bring a site-readiness checklist and require a signature. If they won't sign, note refusals and send a follow-up email summarizing the gaps.
- Add contingency language to your invoices and contracts for missing resources, delayed access, or construction overruns.

- Have a fallback plan: portable water totes, extra hose and fittings, battery backups, temporary storage containers. These are stopgaps, not standards, and should be billed accordingly.
- Train your ops team to escalate immediately. The first hour you discover a critical constraint is the first hour you notify the client—and your leadership.

One more point: your reputation depends on doing the right thing with wastewater. Never dump in landscaping, storm drains, or sinks not designed for it. If there's no proper disposal point, stop. Document. Communicate. Protect your company.

That first-night nightmare turned me into a stickler for readiness and a defender of my team's time. I don't apologize for insisting on basic infrastructure. I've learned the hard way: it's far cheaper to be clear up front than to be heroic after the fact—with a coffee pot in your hand and 25 gallons to go.

The audio version of this podcast can be found on YouTube or my website.

[00:00:08.05] - Ray
Joel, we're talking about real issues on startups that first night. You and I have shared some notes. I have shared some notes. There have been some doozies.

[00:00:18.10] - Joel
So going way back early in my career, I was promoted, and this was one of my big first startups. A brand-new build. They tore down a bunch of buildings. I mean, this narrative is, "Okay, well, we got these floors done. Grand opening is going to be on Monday". So we had a weekend to do a final clean of this entire space. I don't know the actual square footage. I'd have to guess it was maybe one million square feet of space.

[00:00:42.18] - Ray
That's a lot of building.

[00:00:44.05] - Joel
That's a lot of building. So, we bring all our equipment in, auto scrubbers, restroom carts. So there's all this equipment that had to come in. And I'm looking for slop sinks and water closets, custodial closets. There was none in the entire building.

[00:01:01.21] - Ray
I beg your pardon?

[00:01:02.26] - Joel
There was none in the entire building. You know why? (No.) They determined that they should have the maximum square footage for rental space rather than to figure out how to clean it.

[00:01:13.29] - Ray
Oh, God. You know, Joel, that's like putting in a restroom and say, "Sinks are optional".

[00:01:23.04] - Joel
Yeah, kind of. Now, think about this. You have a 25-gallon auto scrubber. It holds 25 gallons of clean water. You know how we had to fill it?

[00:01:32.05] - Ray
No clue.

[00:01:32.23] - Joel
Back then, they had those bun coffee pots that were hard (plumbed) into all the break areas. And we had to fill up little carafes, and we had to fill up the auto scrubber. Tell me that wasn't a waste of time.

[00:01:47.14] - Ray
How do you explain extra time to the customer?

[00:01:50.11] - Joel
How do you explain the extra time to your boss? "Hey, this is over budget". I called the vice president, my boss, who was the director of operations. I called everybody. I had a phone number and said, "Help, you're never going to believe this, but there's no closets". But all the blueprints we had showed closets at the final design that they were going to remove all these water closets. Plus, there was no place for us to store all the toilet paper, all of the paper towel, all the hand soap, all of our vacuum cleaners. So, they had to build off the dock in order to have a place where we could secure and store our stuff.

[00:02:24.18] - Ray
But that wouldn't have been on the first night.

[00:02:26.13] - Joel
No. We filled up the machine. But these are real-life things that happen. Nothing goes as planned. We had all our plans down, who was going to do what, how we were going to attack the building, everything. But then you get there, and you don't have water. How do you clean

a building without water? How do you clean a building without electric? Because of instances like that, right in most of my contracts, we have to have a place to store our equipment.

[00:02:50.02] - Ray
Okay, so you have hit right where we need to go. Talking to the commercial cleaning company owner, commercial cleaning company manager, the manager on site. Whoever is that Ops person. They're taking over a new building, they're taking over a new structure. Right up until that point, the assumption was, "We have all of these resources that we expect to perform the service". And then they're not available for whatever reason.

[00:03:15.08] - Joel
Correct. So, you have to spell it out.

[00:03:17.21] - Ray
First in the agreement, and then when you find that is not the case, then what?

[00:03:22.28] - Joel
It's breach of contract. They have to understand we couldn't do our work. I'm still going to get paid for it because I came in on the date that I was told, and this is what we're going to do. There's now an added cost because you don't have these resources that I need.

[00:03:35.01] - Ray
Now, Joel, that might feel ballsy for someone who has just started their cleaning company.

[00:03:39.24] - Joel
Wait till they encounter it and they have to deal with eating all those costs. They will learn really quick. It's not me being pompous or cocky. Experience matters. Having gone through this type of thing, because that's how we learn. You deal with a problem, and most of the times when you have to rectify a problem, that's on you. But if you can go into a contract and tell them that there's these issues, I'm looking at a contract now. At all their facilities, there's no place to store anything. There's no slop sink, there's no access to water. They're wondering why they're turning over their janitorial accounts. I pointed it out to them.

[00:04:13.25] - Ray
No one brought this up to them before?

[00:04:15.18] - Joel
I don't know if it's ever been brought up, but it's never been rectified. I told them, "(If) they go with me, these issues have to be rectified because it cannot clean a facility without access to water".

[00:04:26.00] - Ray
Even one of the simpler pieces of all that, Joel, is once the water has been used, it needs to be disposed of. We had a previous episode about...

[00:04:33.27] - Joel
Dumping into the wrong facility or the wrong areas which causes environmental issues? Absolutely.

[00:04:38.28] - Ray
For those of you who are operating their companies and are not yet comfortable with addressing this in a constructive way to build your business, this is a great reason to contact Joel. Joel, thank you.

[00:04:50.17] - Joel
You're welcome.