



They Don't Even Say 'Hi' To Me When I Come To Work

By Susan Saldibar

Building great workplace cultures represents a huge opportunity for the senior living sector. But is anyone doing something about it?

Sobering Numbers

By 2050 the population of seniors living in the U.S. will double. That's good news for senior living providers. Except that we will need about 1.2 million workers by 2025 to meet the surge. And, given our staffing drought, we're not even close.

With stats like these, it's no wonder that hiring, engaging and retaining a new generation of talent is keeping senior living providers awake at night. We know there's a problem. But no one seems to quite know if the problem is solvable. Or, if it is, how to go about solving it.

Changing our culture? Really?

Steve Moran and I recently had a lively discussion on this topic with staff engagement specialist Neil Gulsvig, co-founder and CEO of Align, along with Nancy Anderson, Align's Senior VP of Engagement Solutions.

We talked about how senior living communities are working (or not) at growing great engagement cultures.

As the visionary and innovator behind the Align methodology, we let Neil share his thinking with us. Here is what he had to say:

True leadership recognizes the need to attract and engage a truly promising new generation. But many struggle with how to go about doing it.

Established processes like hiring, onboarding, performance management and recognition need to be revitalized; these processes need to recognize each employee as a whole person, not just a pair of hands performing tasks.

HR has been fundamentally turned on its head, as Millennials bring with them a desire for meaningful work, growth, and work/life balance that is fulfilling in new (often non-monetary) ways.

Senior care leadership needs to change not only their workforce processes, but the entire cultural infrastructure. This is done by frontline managers embracing behaviors and practices that are known to engage the hearts and minds of employees.

Creating a culture of employee engagement: It is not a flavor-of-the-month

Working with leaders in senior living, Align has helped them to develop something pretty revolutionary for this industry: a culture strategy. “It’s not that people don’t want to change,” explains Neil. “They do. But the skillset they need to meet the culture challenge needs to be cultivated by creating a strategy for change.”

But is culture a strategy?

Nancy explains, “Only by treating culture as a core organizational strategy, can we raise it to a level where it is constantly visible. This cannot be a flavor-of-the-month type of initiative; it’s not a mission statement we hang in the lobby and forget. It’s a paradigm change that can’t be ignored.”

Neil describes the process as sort of a cultural “drip” campaign; but one that never stops.

The five attributes of culture - Your building blocks

When creating this strategy, there are five key cultural attributes management should focus on:

1. **Clear sense of purpose:** Employees must have a clear line of sight to what matters most in the organization.
2. **People-focused managers:** Managers and supervisors need to coach, develop and genuinely care about their employees.
3. **Active employee voice:** Employees must have opportunities to share ideas, express concerns and provide input on improvement opportunities.
4. **Meaningful connectedness:** The workplace should support a sense of belonging and promote trust and collaboration among co-workers.
5. **Visible integrity:** Organizational values must be reflected in day-to-day behavior.

The key is to reinforce these attributes through a combination of operational and organizational changes, so that the culture becomes deeply embedded within the community. So much so that even when a key person leaves, the culture lives on.

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Steve asked Neil what drives him crazy. He told us it’s the lack of cohesiveness. He can tell when it’s there and when it is lacking, mostly in the attitudes of employees. “We did a survey for a client recently,” he says. “A comment from a line staff member was, ‘They don’t even say hi to me when I come to work.’ That’s beyond unacceptable. We have work to do.”

Yes, we do. But the good news is that someone is finally doing a lot more than talking about it.

We’re looking forward to doing a deeper dive into each of the five key cultural attributes in subsequent articles. So stay tuned. In the meantime, read more about the growing importance of creating innovative strategies to attract and retain top talent in a recent article on PointClickCare’s Blog – [Your Vibe Attracts Your Tribe: Senior Living Staffing for Success](#). PointClickCare is a Senior Housing Forum partner.

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