

American Senior Communities

Exceptional customer service is a result of happy employees. This senior care community organization goes above and beyond to prove the point.

Service First

The challenge of any organization is to stay as close to the frontlines as possible while maintaining enough flexibility to change when it's necessary.

But it's often the case that the more managerial layers you have between you and your employees, the more difficult it becomes to adjust. So when American Senior Communities (ASC) incorporated in 2000, its founders decided the only way to stay on top of the industry's changes was to flatten its organizational chart.

Dan Benson, COO and one of ASC's original founders, operates under that same philosophy today, spending roughly 80% of his time out in the field, close to his customers, and in the lives of the employees at each of the nearly 50 senior communities under the company's umbrella. It's this



down-to-earth approach that's made ASC one of the most successful senior care organizations in Indiana.

"At all times, we're either serving the customer or serving the people who serve the customer," he said. "Our resources, energy, training, and compensation are directed toward our frontline employees to make them the kind of leaders we need to ensure our customers are receiving the kind of treatment they deserve."

True leadership

According to Benson, there are two kinds of leaders in the world. There are those whose goal is to keep an organization running smoothly by minimizing chaos and maintaining the status quo. But true leaders are those willing to take a chance and make a change although it may not be the easiest choice to make.

ASC defines its leaders under the latter category and gives them the autonomy to make changes to their facilities based on what is needed within their communities. So when Benson recently pulled his facility leaders together, he didn't give a typical leadership speech, pointing out a book to read or a lecture to listen to that would tell them to show more desire, energy, or confidence. Instead, he challenged them to react. He believes that one of the greatest assets of leaders is to have the



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courage to react quickly to the ever-changing challenges facing them.

“We believe everything rises and falls with leadership,” Benson said. “We want our leaders to be the experts and to have the confidence to come to us with a game plan because they’ve been out in their local communities and understand what needs are waiting to be met.”

From a marketing perspective, this leadership delegation has given ASC what Benson calls a Mayo Clinic advantage. Rather than selling an open bed or vacancy, each facility sells its programs.

“We showcase key clinical programs or, in the case of independent and assisted living, lifestyle programs and not the fact that we have an open bed,” he said. “In the same way patients will fly over hundreds of hospitals to get to the Mayo Clinic because of its strong clinical outcomes and the reputation of its programs, we want people to drive by five nursing homes to get to ours because they know of our programs, not just our vacancies.”

No perfect world

There are four qualities ASC looks for in its leaders. The first is a vision of hope for the future. The second is a detailed focus on today. The third is an understanding that for something to happen, a sense of urgency is necessary.

These first three principles, as well as ASC’s flat organizational chart, led the organization’s leadership to develop O2NE, which stands for Opportunities to Nursing Excellence, a \$1 million program that encourages employees to continue their education.

“Many times, we worry about issues that are out of our control,” said Benson. “With O2NE, we’ve found a way to focus our time and energy on something we can change.”

O2NE was developed by the key leaders of Benson’s leadership team to proactively react to the current nursing shortage. The team approached frontline staff and nurse’s aides and asked how many wanted to become a nurse. Many said they did, but children and other life issues got in the way, making it practically impossible for them to improve their lives or grow their healthcare careers.

Although ASC has a traditional tuition reimbursement plan, Benson and his leadership team realized to help these employees reach their potential, they needed to be innovative. Through O2NE, CNAs can go to school, be tutored, and have childcare provided to them at no cost. The organization

even allows the enrollees to work 30 hours a week while it pays them for 40 to ensure they can maintain good grades.

But perhaps the most impressive part of the O2NE program is that there are no strings attached. “If employees get to the end of training and want to work in pediatrics or oncology, they can leave,” said Benson. “Some people say the \$1 million could be put to better use, but what they don’t realize is the investment is paid back in a multitude of ways because it highlights our culture.”

He’s seen the biggest payback when recruiting. When Benson tells potential frontline leaders about O2NE, they immediately want to come to work for ASC, but the organization’s generosity also appeals to newly graduated nurses looking to join an organization focused on doing the right thing.

It’s this focus on culture that defines the fourth characteristic ASC wants out of its leaders, which is an ability to celebrate the joy of the journey. “When we care for the seniors of Indiana, we’re caring for people who helped create our society,” Benson said.

“Caring for seniors is fun, and getting involved in the lives of your employees only enhances that,” he continued. “Even though times are tough, you’ve got to push through those challenges to get on the other side and enjoy the journey of life.” +

—Amanda Gaines

