



by Heather Simons

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Two years ago, Sloan Bentley, CEO of Seniority Inc., Pleasanton, Calif., began to seriously consider what it would take to ensure the consistency and success of hospitality efforts at long-term care communities, from CCRCs to assisted living. While the comfort and care of residents in all long-term care communities is of paramount importance, Bentley noticed that many of her client's communities lacked a strong, definitive culture that constantly reminded team members of their mission as caregivers.

So Bentley decided to learn from a company known to provide consistently exceptional hospitality: the Ritz-Carlton.

"The Ritz-Carlton has a very defined training and culture that is reinforced on a daily basis," Bentley says. "We thought it was a wonderful program, but we recognized that a program for a hotel wouldn't be relevant to the retirement housing business."

Unlike hotel guests, long-term care residents live in the communities year round. Therefore, Bentley and her team devised a customized program to suit their residents. For example, at the Ritz-Carlton a database called Mystique keeps track of guest preferences such as a fondness for reading the Wall Street Journal in the morning versus USA Today.

Seniority adopted a customized concept for senior living called The Seniority Distinction for residents and their family members and friends who regularly frequent the community. If one resident mentions that she likes to eat whole wheat toast with butter every morning for breakfast, a caregiver can write down that resident's preference on a card. The information is then added to a database, and from then on the resident will always receive the breakfast she prefers, without having to ask.

"Residents will say to us, 'I can't believe you remembered how I like my toast every morning,'" Bentley says. "It provides a sense of heightened personalization."

In addition to the resident database, Seniority has rolled out about 30 other initiatives under a program called Seniority Spirit that debuted in five long-term care communities in early 2010. The program, Bentley says, can completely alter the culture at long-term care communities and improve the attitudes and accountability of team members, as long as everyone, from resident assistants to directors, is on board.

"We don't want this to be a training program of the month," Bentley says. "We want this to be a culture change."

Comprehensive Orientation

By the end of December 2009, every team member at the communities adopting the Seniority Spirit program had been trained in a two-day orientation and paired up with a learning coach to help them stay on track with the Seniority Spirit principles.

They learned the foundations of service (greet everyone with a smile; anticipate, acknowledge and act; and be warm and genuine) and took note of the 14 commitments to exceptional care, including "I own every problem I see" and "I look for the good in others and assume positive intentions."

After 21 days of training—because it takes 21 days to make a habit—a follow-up orientation made sure that caregivers had adapted to the culture changes taking place.

By April 2010, the Seniority Spirit program has been in full swing for four months, and already Bentley says she has seen the positive effects.

"Because the program has been written into the job descriptions and incorporated into daily work, we're seeing feedback," she says. "If something is not satisfactory, a caregiver will say, 'That's not the Seniority Spirit way.'"

While culture change doesn't happen overnight, Bentley says that self-monitoring has begun, whereby caregivers feel a sense of accountability and have taken responsibility for their actions and the actions of others. The changes in attitude and expectation, she says, are becoming a part of their lives.

From Trouble to Triumph

At Cottonwood Court in Fresno, Calif., the Seniority Spirit culture change has helped to turn around a community suffering from serious financial issues and a less-than-flattering reputation. Today, Cottonwood Court is thriving.

"If a community has a bad reputation, there's a reason," says Jim Stacy, regional operations manager at Seniority. "A lot of the problems at Cottonwood Court had to do with team performance and attitude. Seniority Spirit provided a backbone of expectations, and that has made a big difference with the team."

Reward systems designed to empower and appreciate resident assistants are an integral part of the Seniority Spirit program. For example, the Shining Star initiative rewards caregivers who present innovative ideas with a monetary prize.

Every Friday in a daily newsletter, a Stellar Story is shared throughout all of the communities. Stellar Stories recognize and reward extraordinary care. In one case, a couple moved into a community, and on move-in day a few team members found out that it was their wedding anniversary. In response, the staff members took it upon themselves to set up a private dining room and dinner for the couple. Caregivers featured in the winning Stellar Story receive gift cards and a note of recognition from Sloan.

Recently, Cottonwood Court was featured in a Stellar Story, and the staff was thrilled. "They do like getting the gift cards, but the recognition is much more important," Stacy says. "Everyone at the company is seeing their name, so it's a constant reminder of doing the right thing."

Another program called Team Member Empowerment allows a team member to spend up to \$250 to fix a problem, address an issue or make a one-of-a-kind experience for a resident or their family member, without having to ask a supervisor first. At Cottonwood Court, a team member drove a resident to pick up her prescription at the pharmacy. When they arrived, she realized she had no money with her. The driver immediately paid for the resident's prescriptions himself and was reimbursed when he returned.

"That team member was able to recognize a very embarrassing moment for the resident and take care of it right away," Stacy says. "It makes a huge difference in the lives of residents."

"For the team members who are less than exceptional but don't want to be, the Seniority Spirit program has given them the motivation and direction to be better, to be exceptional," Stacy says. "For the team member who is less than exceptional and does not want to improve, it gives them the opportunity to choose to go somewhere else."

Recently, when a resident's husband passed away, at least 20 of her family members filed in and out of Cottonwood Court in the following days. At the end of the week, the resident and her family approached the Cottonwood Court team and said that they didn't know how to properly express how comforted they felt during this difficult time, so they made a list of words that they could attribute to the team.

"The list included words like loving, compassionate, kind and caring," Stacy says.

Share the Spirit

Ultimately, Seniority would like to share the Seniority Spirit model with other providers who can implement the program at their communities, Bentley says. Regular surveys throughout the year will gauge resident satisfaction and initiatives will be added or augmented as time goes on.

For his part, Stacy says he believes that all long-term care communities will begin to adopt the Seniority Spirit program or something like it eventually. From the start, baby boomers will enter long-term care communities with different-and higher-expectations than their predecessors from the start. In addition,

a younger generation of team members may not instinctively know how to address elderly residents. The structured training that is an integral part of a program like Seniority Spirit will keep everyone on a path to consistently exceptional care, while allowing caregivers to voice their concerns, Stacy says.

"We had to create the annual company goals for this year, but the goals for next year will come straight from the team to show the company what they think should be changed," Stacy says.

And while empowering team members is a huge part of the process, the ultimate focus of Seniority Spirit is still on the residents and their family members.

"We want our communities to be known for exceptional care and services, and we want to have happier residents and family members," Bentley says. "That's the primary goal."

Heather Simons is assistant editor at ADVANCE.

<http://long-term-care.advancweb.com/Features/Top-Story/Seniority-Spirit.aspx>