



SENIORITY WHITE PAPER

Change for Everyone

The Role of Team Members in Shaping a Culture of Hospitality

Executive Summary

Change has never been so pronounced in senior living as it is today. Our communities are changing as customers change. Our business models are shifting in response to new economic realities. And everywhere there is talk of “culture change.” The term itself is even subject to change, to variations and new definitions. Some leaders use culture change to describe the shift to person-centered care. Others employ the phrase to describe the move toward more homelike design in care settings. Still others use culture change to advocate greater excellence in customer service. Whatever the definition, what’s common is the belief that leaders drive culture change.

While leadership is crucial in culture change, not enough attention is paid to the role of employees. Ultimately, the formation of a healthy culture depends upon employees practicing certain habits day in and day out. In a senior living community, a healthy culture – and by “culture” we mean the attitudes, behaviors and standards that shape and reinforce action – emerges as employees discover that their own well-being is bound up in the hospitality they offer others.

Seniority is publishing this white paper to shed light on the role of employees in shaping culture. Here we build upon our 2009 white paper, “From Style to Substance: Offering Authentic Hospitality in Senior Living.” That paper traced the shift to a hospitality orientation in our profession and outlined three challenges organizations face when venturing this way: the culture challenge, the customer challenge, and the leadership challenge. In this latest paper, we explore more fully the leadership challenge, which in a nutshell is the question, Who defines your culture? We come at this issue in three ways:

Culture is the attitudes, behaviors and standards that shape and reinforce action.

* *By clarifying terms and proposing a theory of change.* One of the sources of confusion in senior living is the term “culture change” itself. As generally understood, the term suggests that culture change is something leaders make happen; and as the term relates to employees, the common understanding (or misunderstanding) is that leaders must change employees’ attitudes and behaviors. But this is not how substantive and sustainable change occurs. Real change happens when employees themselves choose to alter their habits in order to realize greater fulfillment or satisfaction in their work. As former Herman Miller CEO Max De Pree puts it: “The organization can never be something that I as a member don’t choose to be.”¹ For that reason, “culture formation” is a more fitting term; it signifies the process of building upon employees’ own strengths and aspirations.

¹ Max De Pree, *Leading Without Power: Finding Hope in Serving Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 105.



* *By delineating the roles of senior leaders, managers and frontline team members in culture formation.* Senior leaders play a critical role: that is to articulate a vision which calls the organization's members to live into their greatest potential. Ultimately, however, frontline staff must believe they truly have the power to impact their communities. Their role is to claim that power through daily practices. Training, supporting and honoring employees as they embrace these practices becomes a key function of managers and senior leaders. They must clearly communicate expectations and help create the conditions in which employees succeed.

* *By reflecting on our experience in culture formation.* Our company has learned some valuable lessons since introducing Seniority Spirit, a hospitality and culture formation initiative. Among the most important lessons is that employees – or team members, to use our term – will own this initiative to the extent that they shape the initiative. Our team members have discovered that they possess the power to impact their communities. They know how much the success of the initiative rides on their performance – and they welcome that expectation. Team members understand that the initiative flourishes as they flourish, as they take it upon themselves to offer hospitality and find fulfillment in doing so.

Our aim in publishing this white paper is to inform the profession and inspire learning. While there is a great deal of talk about culture change, we need more focused dialogue and training about how change truly happens, and how it can last. To discover *how*, we have to go to the front line.

Introduction: A Story of How a Culture Is Formed

Not long ago one of Seniority's team members overheard a resident who was getting her hair done in the beauty salon say she wished someone would also apply her makeup. Fredda Sharp doesn't work in the beauty salon at Sun Grove Resort Village in Peoria, Ariz. She is the director of life enrichment. She just happened to be in the beauty salon. But she took it upon herself to answer this resident's request. And the result was a very happy customer.

The story illustrates two important points. First, Fredda took the initiative to serve the resident. She didn't run out of the beauty salon for fear of getting roped into a job that's "not hers." She didn't politely pass the request on to someone else. Instead, she paid attention to the resident, and she saw the resident's request through to completion. The second point: This is how a community's culture is formed – by small yet significant gestures of exceptional service. That means a single individual can help shape the culture, which we define as *the attitudes, behaviors and standards of an organization that guide and reinforce individual and collective action*. It didn't take long for Fredda to apply the makeup, but her service made the resident's day. And it made Sun Grove shine.

"Culture change" is often presented as management-driven. But culture is truly formed at the front line as team members embrace the task to create one-of-a-kind experiences for residents. Fredda helped shape her culture by following through on one of the 14 service commitments



that undergird Seniority Spirit, our hospitality and culture formation program introduced in December 2009: “I promptly respond to the needs and unexpressed wishes of our residents.”

Fredda took the initiative and performed a task that is not listed on her job description but is consistent with her vocational aspiration: she wants to provide exceptional service. Had she not taken the initiative, she would have missed out on an experience that is important to her own well-being. As it happened, she followed her instinct, trusted her own desire to serve, and stepped out of her official role as director of life enrichment to apply the resident’s makeup. She made a change, and that change marks the culture of her community.

The good feelings engendered by an action like Fredda’s – both the resident’s delight and the team member’s satisfaction in serving – contribute to the community’s overall spirit, which is synonymous with culture. Such positive behavior becomes contagious. Imagine that kind of service, and the resulting delight and satisfaction, repeated across a community. The impact is really exponential. So one person can make a huge difference.

Later that day after her visit to the beauty salon, the resident came to Fredda, took her hand, and said, “Thank you, Fredda. I feel so beautiful. I feel like a queen!” Fredda must have felt special, too. That’s what happens when we offer exceptional service: we create cultures where everyone’s joy is palpable. We all feel like royalty.

A Theory of Change

Fredda’s story upends conventional wisdom about how change occurs. Traditional thinking says that leadership, generally the top leader, must drive change. The “drive” metaphor is revealing: it suggests the leader is the operator of a machine (people) that won’t move until the operator makes it move; or, to use the more “natural” metaphor, the leader is the herder of cattle (people) that must be pushed and prodded to go in a particular direction.

Two assumptions are implicit in this way of thinking:

1. People do not want to change.
2. The leader must make people change.

For leaders who seek to shape their cultures in lasting ways, it is important to unpack these two assumptions. The dominant thinking on leadership is built upon these assumptions. Most of the literature emphasizes how the leader *makes change happen*. The leader sets the vision. The leader mobilizes the followers. The leader gets people to behave in new ways and so produces change.² In this way of thinking, we could easily imagine that the leader’s task becomes all the

² While John P. Kotter offers valuable insight on the need to connect with employees’ emotions in any change effort, his take on the role of the leader is fairly conventional and an example of the dominant thinking: “Leadership *defines* what the future should look like, *aligns* people with that vision, and



more important in a senior living community, where, we might assume, team members who are comfortable in old habits of serving older adults not only do not want to change but will actively resist change. So now everything really depends on the leader. But notice again Fredda's story. No one told her to change. No one told her what to do. She took it upon herself to provide extra service to the resident *because she wanted to*.

Daniel Pink offers a different take on "drive." Rather than using it as the metaphor for the task of leaders, Pink locates "drive" within people. "Drive" is the intrinsic motivation people have to make their lives better, to find more meaning in their work, to improve their performance – to change.

Pink draws upon recent research as well as the work of Douglas McGregor, who in the late 1950s began to articulate a new understanding of intrinsic motivation. The conventional thinking, which McGregor called Theory X, was that "most people must be coerced, controlled, directed, and threatened with punishment to get them to put forth adequate effort toward the achievement of organizational objectives." But McGregor had another view, which he called Theory Y, that people actually want responsibility and are self-motivated.³

McGregor and Pink's perspective is borne out at Plymouth Village in Redlands, Calif., where Seniority manages the sales and marketing office. Earlier this year a couple made a deposit for an apartment home at the community, but soon after the husband died and the wife decided to delay the move. She asked for a refund of her deposit. The sales and marketing team went much further – on their own initiative. After talking with the wife about her food preferences, the team had a personal chef prepare three meals and delivered them to the wife. She and her family were blown away by Plymouth Village's compassion and generosity. The experience was incredibly rewarding for the Plymouth Village team members, too, because they want the responsibility to provide exceptional service and are motivated to attain this goal.

Team members want the responsibility to provide exceptional service and are motivated to attain this goal.

If people are self-motivated, then a leader's attempt to push and prod team members to change will at a minimum offend them or, worse, turn them off to the change the leader seeks. Those closest to the leader may buy in to his or her vision, but the impact is limited. Seth Kahan calls it the "lighthouse effect": where the leader is talking, the light is shining; but just outside the light things go dark quickly.⁴

*inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles" [emphasis added]. His title says it all: *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996).*

³ Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 76.

⁴ Seth Kahan, *Getting Change Right: How Leaders Transform Organizations from the Inside Out* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 2ff.



True change happens not by imposition of the leader's values but through engagement that reveals shared values, Kahan says. For that reason, communication must be dialogical rather than one-way. Indeed, a vision of change might only truly emerge and be authentically received as people make meaning together, Kahan says. He references "social construction," the process whereby individuals make meaning via relationships and figure out things along the way rather than in advance.⁵ So real change is something we do together, which means it is incumbent upon senior leaders to be in dialogue with frontline team members. And dialogue means listening.

There is one more element to add to this theory of change: People embrace the new only as they see the new preserving what's most important about the old. People change in order to honor some essential aspect of who they are. That paradox is at the heart of a self-organizing world. All creatures and living systems constantly seek change and organize themselves for change, but we only move toward a new situation by drawing upon who we have been, according to Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers.⁶

We tap those habits and perceptions we have developed over time as we have made choices about who we will be. Scientists call this "self-reference," a kind of backward-looking process that, paradoxically, moves us forward. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers write, "We will change our self if we believe that the change will preserve our self. We are unable to change if we cannot find ourselves in a new version of the world. We must be able to see that who we are will be available in this new situation."⁷

Consider a longtime CNA in a skilled nursing center, a team member whose habits have been formed over years of daily service and is now being told she must change her practices. Change is possible for her. Yet she will only change as she recognizes that the core of who she is – her genuine concern for residents, for example; or her natural gift for conversation – is preserved in the new situation.

Leaders who seek change must be mindful of who their team members are and attuned to what is most important to them.

Leaders who seek change, then, must be mindful of who their team members are and attuned to what is most important to them. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers put it this way: "We encourage others to change only if we honor who they are now. We ourselves engage in change only as we discover that we might be more of who we are by becoming something different."⁸

⁵ Ibid., 17-18.

⁶ Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999).

⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁸ Ibid.



We now have a three-part theory of change:

1. People have an inner drive to change.
2. People make sense of change and figure out the path of change in conversation with each other.
3. People change in order to preserve the core of who they are.

Start With What Team Members Want

At the first orientation session for new Seniority team members, we do an exercise called “Focus on You.” We ask team members a series of questions: What makes you really happy? What is one of your strengths? What is the best part of working with seniors? And we ask them to name one benefit of great service. The activity is not just an icebreaker. We need to know what makes every team member tick and what they aspire to, because this is the path of passion and potential, the most sustainable way to truly shape a culture of exceptional service.

Team members want two seemingly contradictory things: autonomy and accountability. Daniel Pink notes the belief that autonomy is a “way to bypass accountability,” but that’s not true. Autonomy is not about Lone Ranger independence, Pink says. Rather it’s about the power to exercise choice – for our own benefit as well as for others. So from the start autonomy has a relational or communal quality, a connection to others who would hold us accountable.

This framework needs a little more explanation. First, on autonomy. Team members want the freedom to exercise their power to make good choices. This desire is most apparent in the midst of problem situations. Through Seniority Spirit we have noticed that team members eagerly embrace the commitment to “own every problem I see.” Here’s how that works:

If you’re a dining services team member, and a resident tells you he locked himself out of his apartment, your job is not to pass this resident off to maintenance. Owning every problem means saying, “Mr. Smith, I am delighted to help you. I will ask our maintenance supervisor to meet you at your apartment immediately.”

If you see litter on the campus, you never say, “That’s buildings and grounds’ job to pick up trash.” Owning the problem means picking up the litter yourself. It’s your campus, so you not only own the problem, you own the opportunity to make your campus as beautiful as possible.

This commitment to own every problem is so important to Seniority that we give team members permission to spend up to \$250 to solve a problem. That sends a message to our residents and their families: that we intend to deliver exceptional service. And imagine what this commitment says to our team members. It is an acknowledgement of the team members’ power. They hear loud and clear that we are exceptional people who have the freedom and permission to create one-of-a-kind experiences for our customers.



Knowing that, and claiming their power, team members want to step up. They discover that delivering exceptional service is inspiring and incredibly rewarding. Recall Fredda's story and other similar instances that happen every day in senior living communities. We offer simple gestures of hospitality – a helping hand, a little extra attention, a small kindness like applying a resident's makeup – not because these acts are required, though at times we may start the gesture out of a sense of duty; ultimately, we do this because we want the joy of the gesture. We discover that our own well-being is connected to the hospitality we offer others. Fredda's gesture certainly impressed the resident, made her feel special, and truly made the resident's day. But that gesture also made Fredda's day. In offering such hospitality, Fredda gave herself the gift of joy.

Our team members embrace the opportunity to serve, and they gladly take the initiative to serve.

Disney, perhaps more than any other hospitality or entertainment company, gets this. Why do their cast members go to such lengths to make their guests feel special? They do it because it makes them, the cast, feel special. Disney team members recognize they have the power of magic, and it charms them.

Similarly, our team members embrace the opportunity to serve, and they gladly take the initiative to serve. The encouragement to be autonomous is not regarded as burdensome but rather fulfillment of what they desire. Team members want to move toward mastery, which is the flourishing of their gifts freely exercised. "I feel more responsible knowing that I'm valued and at the same time knowing that everything I do counts," says Jerry Mercado, a medical technician supervisor at Seniority-managed Courtside Cottages in Vacaville, Calif. "It makes me feel special."

But autonomy isn't the end. It goes hand in hand with accountability. Our desire for mastery is bound up in community. We want to exercise our power *and* we want our colleagues to respectfully remind us to use that power to fulfill our potential. That's why Max De Pree is keen to hear this question: "What are you going to bring in terms of competence, contributions, and commitment to this project?" De Pree adds, "I would gladly follow a leader who asks that kind of question. If I am going to be an authentic member of a team, I'd like to know what's expected of me, and I'd really like to have a leader ask me what I'm bringing to the game."⁹

De Pree's comment underscores another lesson we have learned in Seniority Spirit. We do not have to compel people to work with each other. They want good working relationships because of the mutual benefit. One of our 14 commitments in Seniority Spirit is this: "I build meaningful relationships with those I work with and serve." Our experience tells us there is a direct correlation between the depth of team member relationships and the reach of our service. When relationships between team members are deep, when our trust is strong and we welcome mutual accountability, our capacity to serve is extended. Allan Slight, executive director of Seniority-

⁹ De Pree, 80.



managed Nikkei Senior Gardens in Arleta, Calif., puts it this way: “Meaningful relationships are important for our team members. They want to have a meaningful relationship with each other. They want to build off of each other’s successes. They want to feel motivated and empowered by each other ...”

The mutual regard of meaningful relationships makes all the difference. The latest research shows that employee engagement comes about not because of carrots and sticks, nor through reward programs or punitive measures, but because of respect.¹⁰ Team members want to know they are truly valued; and they want to work in environments where respect for everyone is abundant. To put it another way, team members want hospitality: communities that welcome their gifts and call out their potential.

Such respect makes Ritz-Carlton a star in the world of hospitality. The company’s motto is rooted in mutual respect – self-respect plus respect for the other: “We are Ladies and Gentleman serving Ladies and Gentlemen.” Inspired by Ritz-Carlton’s holistic understanding of hospitality, we set about to develop our own approach for senior living; but our motto for Seniority Spirit is anchored in the same mutual respect: “We are exceptional people providing exceptional care and services.”

So What Are Leaders For?

Our theory of change begs the question: If people have an inner drive to change, if they figure out change together and over time rather than via advance directives from the top, and if they change only as they see the core of who they are being preserved in the new situation, what then is the point of leadership?

We see four important tasks for senior leaders and managers:

1. Senior leaders and managers “set the table” for change.
2. Senior leaders and managers engage team members in constructing and interpreting change.
3. Senior leaders and managers encourage celebration on the way to change.
4. Senior leaders and managers carry the banner all the way.

All four tasks are critical. Our theory of change does not discount the role of leaders but rather suggests more crucial and effective practices for good leadership.

¹⁰ Paul L. Marciano, *Carrots and Sticks Don’t Work: Build a Culture of Employee Engagement with the Principles of Respect* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).



Setting the Table

For culture formation to succeed, every team member must understand why we're doing this, what's at stake, and how he or she plays such a critical role. Communicating this and engaging team members in conversation about the purpose of our effort is the work of leaders. It's the first order of business for hospitality. Call it "setting the table." That's why orientation for new team members is a centerpiece of Seniority Spirit. Here team members learn what we mean by exceptional service, and they discover how much power they have to shape the culture of their community.

Orientation occurs on the first two days of employment. Indeed, team members cannot work until they complete the two-day session. And we focus on culture rather than paperwork. When we launched Seniority Spirit in December 2009, all of our existing team members went through the two-day orientation. That means everyone in our company is grounded in the Foundation of Service and 14 Service Commitments that exemplify Seniority Spirit.

We talk about greeting everyone with a smile, about being warm and genuine. We underscore our commitment to own every problem we see, to build meaningful relationships with those we work with and serve, to be truthful in what we say and honest in what we do. These commitments should sound familiar. They are the kinds of lessons our grandmothers taught us. But we need the dedicated time of orientation to be reacquainted with this wisdom.

Our orientation doesn't end here. Every team member is assigned to a learning coach who helps the team member apply Seniority Spirit in daily tasks. Because it takes 21 days to make a habit, we don't certify team members until the Day 21 Orientation. At the 365-day mark, every team member goes through a half-day recertification session. All along the way, every day, our team members are immersed in Seniority Spirit through their Daily Huddle, a 15-minute standup meeting where they get education, information, and inspiration.

Why so much focus on orientation? It's plain and simple: successful culture formation depends on our team members. Our company's ambition to be known for exceptional service rests on team members behaving in certain ways, every day. So we want our team members to catch Seniority Spirit from day one. To do this effectively, and systematically, we need our leaders to set the table.

Engaging Team Members

Leaders engage team members in interpreting change. Recall Seth Kahan's comment on social construction: people make meaning together. When it comes to understanding change, people figure it out with each other, in conversation and in collaboration. One of the places where social construction occurs in Seniority is our Daily Huddle.

Across our managed sales offices and client communities, Seniority teams have a 15-minute meeting to start each day. Our teams use this standup meeting to make announcements, share a



common education topic, recognize significant milestones and team member success, and reinforce our culture. In the space of a few minutes, we remind each other how we make a difference in the lives of older adults and their families through service excellence. And then we head out to deliver on that promise – to change things together.

The Daily Huddle is one important way that our team members learn. They learn because the Daily Huddle is always interactive and participative, with leadership of certain elements rotated among the team members. The Daily Huddle is social construction: together our teams figure out what change means in their communities.

It's interesting that leaders have known for years how important it is for people to be involved in their learning, indeed, that learning does not occur without their full participation. And we have known how positive people can be when they have a hand in making decisions that affect their lives. Notice, for instance, this piece of insight from 1945: “(A) person ceases to be reactive and contrary in respect to a desirable course of conduct only when he himself has had a hand in declaring that course of conduct to be desirable.”¹¹ Yet we seem to keep reverting to a mechanistic understanding of leadership, treating people as parts that can be turned and tightened, aligned or replaced. No wonder, then, there is resistance to change when we forget that team members are human beings with needs, aspirations, and creative energy. But we can choose a different way, the better way of engagement. All we have to do is remember what we already know, and trust that knowledge.

Encouraging Celebration

Leaders occupy a symbolic role in the organization, which means team members will often look to leaders for cues about how to behave. So when leaders encourage celebration, they set the tone for others. Leaders signal that it is both good and essential to highlight achievement, recognize performance, and mark milestones.

Stellar Stories are one way we celebrate in Seniority. These short stories, which can be documented by anyone, capture moments when team members have provided exceptional service. Stellar Stories are shared in the Daily Huddle and in other forms in the community, and they are shared across our company.

When leaders encourage celebration, they acknowledge that the change we seek is indeed happening.

When leaders encourage celebration, they acknowledge that the change we seek is indeed happening. Even the smallest acts of celebration – a note, a brief moment of recognition, a high-five in a hallway – reinforce what the effort is all about.

¹¹ Gordon W. Allport, “The Psychology of Participation,” from *Selected Readings in Management*, ed. Fremont A. Shull, Jr. (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1958), 223. Allport’s article was originally published in 1945 in *The Psychology Review*.



Carrying the Banner

Senior leaders and managers must articulate why all the effort of culture formation is worthwhile. This is the banner they carry. They communicate the purpose of culture formation at the outset, and they reinforce it all along the way. They fly this flag in meetings and in one-on-one supervision. When seemingly conflicting pressures compel team members to sideline hospitality, leaders must raise the banner even higher. At the end of the day, leaders' own behaviors will speak loudest. Leaders must consistently practice those habits they preach.

Conclusion

At the very beginning of the first day of orientation for new Seniority team members, the facilitator makes an important statement: “*You* are the most important resource in providing exceptional care and services to our residents and their families!” We truly believe this. Indeed, we are staking our company’s future on our team members. For that reason, we have underscored in this white paper the role of team members in culture formation. We place the accent there because the emphasis is long overdue. Furthermore, we think it is time to issue a wake-up call to leaders who may be valiantly trying to “drive change” but finding themselves sputtering, stalling out or, worse, crashing. There is a role for senior leaders and managers in culture formation, which we have sketched out here. That role is not to “drive change,” however, but to engage team members in shaping their work, their teams, and the spirit of their communities.

That said, the last word on the relationship between leaders and frontline team members in culture formation has not been written. All of us must pay attention to the interplay between senior leaders, managers and frontline team members – it is a dance, really, with noticeable patterns yet surprises as well. We must look for signs of success, drawing out the lessons and applying this knowledge to the improvement of our organizations.

As commitment to hospitality deepens in the senior living profession, we have the opportunity to practice hospitality all across our organizations; in other words, we can be hospitable not only to our residents but to each other. When we fully practice hospitality, we will form cultures that welcome everyone, that call everyone to their best, that become, in Max De Pree’s wonderful phrase, “places of realized potential.”¹²

¹² De Pree, 105.



Questions for Further Discussion

- Think about a change initiative in your organization. Were you able to sustain the desired change? If so, what factors contributed to your success? How critical was it for your team members to own the change?
- What are the key competencies that must be developed on your senior leadership team in order to “set the table” for your team members’ success?
- What banner is senior leadership carrying? To what degree do your leaders’ behaviors match the message of your banner?
- How much of your organization’s orientation program defines culture and team member expectations? How do you continue orienting team members and reinforcing desired habits and behaviors?
- What are the signs of your team members’ self-motivation? What additional responsibilities would they gladly take on? How might your team members’ own passion shape the culture of your organization?

Learn More

We are eager to share the lessons of our journey toward hospitality and culture formation. We offer educational presentations and facilitate board, senior leadership, and organization-wide explorations of these issues. Call Seniority President Sloan Bentley at 925-924-7187 to learn more.