

TOP 5

for Executive Directors

By Joel Goldman, Hanson Bridgett LLP

In my many years of working with providers, I have observed that there are several crucial steps that an executive director can take to enhance the likelihood of success at their community. These top five tips focus on practical rather than legal advice for executive directors. Of course, the two are inextricably interrelated. While even the best run RCFEs occasionally run into problems, there is no question that communities with a strong, effective executive director typically have fewer legal and regulatory problems.

1 LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Over the years of working with senior care providers, I have learned a tremendous amount from many wonderful executive directors. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 20 years ago, I was visiting an upscale CCRC. The executive director was a distinguished gentleman named Ron, who had previously been a general in the Air Force. Ron was giving me and some others a tour of his beautiful community. As we were walking down a long corridor, we came to an intersection. Ron said, "Excuse me," walked about 30 feet down the hallway on our left, picked up a gum wrapper and stuck it in his pocket. He walked back to join us and, without missing a beat, muttered, "I learned when I ran a base, if you don't do it your men won't do it." Great life lesson there.

2 COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR STAFF

Southwest Airlines is the only airline in the U.S. to consistently turn a profit. The company's mantra is that employees come first—even before customers. Southwest's philosophy is if employees are happy, customers will be happy. This approach has direct applicability to assisted living communities. There are many ways in which an executive director can maintain high morale (in addition to getting out of the office and picking up gum wrappers). I recently visited a community in which the executive director holds regular office hours solely for front line staff. Any non-manager staff member can come in and discuss whatever he or she wishes with the executive director. This sends a message to staff that they are important—that the closed door meeting is not just for reprimands.

In many cases, a simple compliment or thank you from the executive director is all that is needed to improve morale. I recall attending an early ALFA (now Argentum) conference in which the keynote speaker claimed that the number one thing that employees desire is a thank you from the boss, yet a majority of employees claimed that they rarely if ever received a thank you.

LEARN FROM YOUR STAFF

Often, those of us at the top of an organization do not see clearly what is going on below. Elicit feedback and suggestions from your front line staff. They may have great ideas about how to improve quality and operate more efficiently. I am reminded of another early ALFA conference in which the keynote speaker was Robert Kriegel, author of the book "Sacred Cows Make The Best Burgers." Mr. Kriegel told a story of working with a large tire manufacturer. The CEO latched on to Mr. Kriegel's suggestion of soliciting input from workers. They put together a program that included suggestion boxes on the factory floors. The CEO rented out a basketball arena to roll out the program and his remarks were received warmly. At the end of his presentation, he asked if there were any questions. A 19-year-old employee raised his hand and said, "I work in a retail store. When the tires come in, they are individually wrapped in plastic. We have to cut the metal bands and remove the plastic and that involves a fair amount of work. Why do we wrap the tires in plastic?" The CEO responded, "That's a great question young man. But there is a good reason we do this. Our customers don't like it when their white walls get streaked." The employee responded with another question, "What's a white wall?" It seems that, for decades after white wall tires went out of vogue, the company was continuing to wrap tires in plastic to protect non-existent white walls. What are you wrapping in plastic in your community? (Hint: Chuck Berry just died. He was 90. I don't think he enjoyed listening to Lawrence Welk.)

And don't forget to solicit suggestions from the employees on the noc shift. In my experience, noc shift employees don't get many chances to interact with the executive director. Simply showing up on occasion makes a big difference. If the executive director and each manager make an occasional appearance in the middle of the night, this can be an effective deterrent to any issues, and can be a positive. Bring in a pizza. Let your employees know that you care about them, that you want to check up on them and make sure that they are doing well and have what they need. They are just as important a part of your team as any of your other employees.

FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR LPA

If you have an issue in your community, contact your LPA (licensing program analyst) for advice. According to the Department of Social Services (DSS), LPAs are there not just for enforcement but for collaboration. I just attended a non-compliance conference in DSS's Oakland Office. My client was called in due to an incident. The executive director had a very good relationship with her LPA. While this did not prevent the community from receiving a deficiency or from being called in for the meeting with the regional manager, it created a positive tone for the meeting. We left the meeting with DSS acknowledging that this was a well-run community and that they viewed the incident as an anomaly. No compliance plan was imposed. DSS accepted the plan of correction proposed by the community.

FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER KEY PEOPLE

Having a good relationship with ombudsmen, paramedics, police, and local officials is also of benefit. A number of years ago, one of my clients was having theft problems in its parking lot. The executive director called the police. The police officer who arrived was very helpful and made some good suggestions to reduce risk of break-ins. As he was finishing, the police officer asked if he could use the living room to write up his report. Of course, the executive director said "Yes." They proceeded to chat while the officer wrote his report.

While they were chatting, the executive director learned that police write a lot of reports. He also learned that much of the time, and especially at night, police officers in that part of town (removed from the police station) tended to write their reports in convenience store parking lots. The executive director then invited the police officer to invite any of his colleagues to come into his community any time, day or night, to write their reports. And the police did just that. After all, he offered a nice, comfortable, well-furnished living room, clean rest rooms, coffee, and snacks. In fact, the executive director started putting out donuts at night. Suffice it to say that whenever the community needed some cooperation or assistance from the police department, they received it.

Of course, these five tips are just scratching the surface of what it takes to be an effective executive director. Readers can find other helpful information in my previous articles, which can be found on the CALA website. And I'm sure as we tackle new challenges in the years ahead, I will come up with more to share with you.

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