



Tackling Turnover

Culture is at the heart of The Springs Living plan to cut turnover in half and build leadership from within

By Liz Lacey-Gotz

About five years ago, The Springs Living community in Tanasbourne, Oregon, was facing an elephant in the room. At an annual evaluation, leadership assessed fantastic overall results in resident satisfaction, occupancy rate and revenue. But rather than simply patting themselves on the back, they turned to face an issue they had been avoiding: Employee turnover was at nearly 100%. After acknowledging the problem, they knew their next step must be to turn things around. So they set a goal to decrease turnover to 50%.

Assessing the heart of the problem

Examining the root causes of the community's turnover problem led to a plan that involved engaging and developing employees. Leadership found that hiring was rarely from within. Many of the employees coming in were young or new to senior care, and needed training to better understand how to grow professionally and learn how to lead. So, the Tanasbourne community, known simply as "The Springs," took on the responsibility of offering leadership training to employees with professional aspirations of moving up.

"We spend so much time training our employees in their tasks and responsibilities, but we spend almost no time helping them grow as individuals. With our new leadership development program, we are investing in them beyond just giving them a paycheck for the hours they put in," says Eric Christensen, regional director of operations at The Springs Living. Christensen has worked at The Springs Living for five years, and in senior living communities for a total of 15 years. "Because we know if we help them grow, they can become the leaders of tomorrow. And they already believe in us, they believe in the culture, and we're giving them the skills to be stronger and more productive professionals."

The Tanasbourne community (known simply as "The Springs") is one of 17 senior living communities across Oregon and Montana that are owned and operated by The Springs Living. These communities include independent living, assisted living and memory care, totaling 2,400 units and 1,600 employees.

Leadership realized that a philosophical shift was needed for the program to be successful. Each leader had to refocus and understand that leading and coaching employees was the most important responsibility they had. So they leaned into the necessary changes, connecting more with their employees, offering them mentoring and starting to really listen to them.

Leadership began the process of change

Leaders started the process by making a commitment to focus on their staff by first simply getting to know them as people—spending a minimum of 10 minutes each day engaging them individually. “Through this process, employees started to see their managers more as colleagues and friends instead of simply taskmasters,” Christensen says.

Leaders were tasked with building quality relationships by doing three things: Ensuring teams know that their leader 1) knows and likes them, 2) believes in their interests and potential for development and 3) hears them and will take action on their concerns or questions. In addition, leaders increased feedback and coaching of individuals on their team, including sharing when an employee was doing the right things, and also redirecting employees who were performing poorly.

Some tactics to increase team engagement included hiring a dedicated staff development manager, monthly mandatory trainings (95%+ attendance was achieved) and shift-to-shift crossover meetings—to help ensure good communication between shifts, and to provide opportunities

for encouragement and coaching. The new manager position serves as an advocate, coach and caregiver for the caregivers, spending one-on-one time with employees to better understand their professional goals and to help them grow.

Doing the right thing

Especially in senior care, it can be difficult to teach specific ways of dealing with issues as each situation is unique and requires critical thinking on-the-spot. Medications and pre-existing conditions can create complex resident scenarios that require constant attention. The Springs has been successful by focusing on what they call the “One thing.”

“As a company we are not policy-centric, though we certainly have our share of policies,” Christensen says. “Instead, we hire great people with great values, who embrace the values of our organization, and then we empower them to do the right thing in any given situation. That supersedes any policy, and is what we call the ‘One thing.’ It resonates with our staff, because they know they are empowered to make decisions to do what’s right for residents.”

Matching value systems up front

When interviewing, the discussion centers around values. “We know how to teach skills, but what resonates is, *Do we have mutual values?*” Christensen says.

Setting clear expectations is also key. For this reason, The Springs created a “playbook” that helps new and existing

The challenges	How to reduce turnover to <50%?	5-year measurable goals
Employee turnover was 100%	Implement a comprehensive program to decrease turnover to 50%	Decrease turnover by 50%
Employee satisfaction, as measured on Pinnacle Surveys, was at a plateau	Continue to monitor employee satisfaction over the course of the program	Increase scores by 10%
Long-term employees were not being promoted into leadership positions because they were not ready/qualified	Leadership training opportunities were made available to employees, who were paid to attend Mentors were provided for all employees	Both of the above
Management positions were being filled by outside people	More effort to interview and hire according to aligned value systems plus more focus on hiring from within	Promote 15 internal candidates each year (representing 10% of workforce)

What was frustrating employees?

- ✓ Unclear expectations, or expectations that didn't apply universally to all
- ✓ Employees (themselves or others) not being held accountable for meeting expectations
- ✓ Employees not being praised when they do things right
- ✓ Employees being told they are wrong without coaching or instruction on what is right
- ✓ Employees not feeling valued (Note: Value was not equal to money in employees' minds)

employees understand what is required on the job. If an employee is not meeting expectations, values are often at the root of the problem. According to Christensen, if the employee doesn't care about the same things that The Springs cares about, how can they provide consistent care?

For new hires, the New Employee Orientation program was changed from a dry presentation to a dynamic telling of The Springs' story, as well as hearing the stories of new employees—all designed to help new hires connect with The Springs, and also with other coworkers.

Measuring results

Making significant change required setting goals that could be measured. Over the course of five years, turnover at The Springs at Tanasbourne was reduced from 100% to 50%, with a trend of getting closer to 40% in the coming year. In addition, the management team has remained consistent for four years, with the exception of one individual who changed roles due to an internal promotion.

How were individual employees held accountable?

Every employee was held accountable for the basics:

1. Tardiness
2. Attendance
3. Uniform
4. Cell phone usage rules
5. Demonstrating The Springs' cultural values

Employee satisfaction measures, however, were higher but not significant, growing from 4.26 in 2015 to 4.37 in 2018. This puzzled leaders given the huge decrease in turnover. Digging deeper they found that the method they were using—phone calls—was not relevant for millennials who preferred a more anonymous tool they could trust. Going forward, The Springs has changed the platform for employee feedback, using the Great Places to Work survey to yield more accurate and meaningful results.

Overall, The Springs met its goal of promoting 15 employees each year from within. Key to that success was the high level of interest in the new leadership training program. So far, more than 67 employees have participated in the development program, and since the first cohort finished in 2017, more than 25 program graduates have been promoted internally.

A Happier Place to Work

A secondary benefit of this work was the happier attitude that pervaded The Springs. Relationships were improved all around. Employees had mentors to help them navigate as needed, and since expectations were more clear, issues could be addressed more easily. Positive reinforcement was enhanced by their "See it, say it" mantra, which encourages employees to speak up and share when they see something positive happening, like a caregiver getting down on his knees to have a chat with a resident in distress.

What's next?

The results of the five-year effort at The Springs have led to the organization implementing a similar leadership development program in their 16 other communities. Staffing coordinators for the larger communities have already been hired as they prepare to start the rollout. "I'm thrilled with the outcomes," Christensen says. "And we see this as an opportunity to scale this program across our other facilities so everyone can benefit and have the long-term effects we are seeing at The Springs at Tanasbourne."

All in all, the leaders have realized they must be prepared to change in the face of new issues, and that success comes in sharing their values and empowering their employees—not just the management teams. They have learned not to fear losing people to promotion, but rather to see it as doing the right thing.

"At the end of the day, you need to realize that you are going to spend money on staff," Christensen says. "Would you rather spend it on turnover or retention? A very good question to consider."



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