



CEO ADVISER

By Dwayne J. Clark

What Goes Around Comes Around

Keeping employees satisfied helps overall performance

It's no coincidence that companies with happy employees succeed consistently. Call it investment or karma, but taking care of your own is smart business practice.

That's why I have taken a leap of faith, throwing away the expense reports, revenue projections and marketing spreadsheets – OK, I filed them – and tried something new for my company's annual management meeting.

Rather than using the meeting to address the staff from management's perspective, the executive directors and trainees in each of our senior living communities and our headquarters staff instead spend four days on the receiving end, by bringing in outsiders to help guide us. It is a role reversal for these company leaders who are daily on the forefront of caregiving. They are the batteries that power our success and the disciples who deliver the message back to each of our 32 communities.

We are in the business of making life fulfilling for aging adults. AegisLiving directors must guide resident care, manage resident family issues, lead a happy and productive staff and achieve strong financial performance for their communities. It is a job that requires energy, compassion, vision and a number of other qualities reliant on having a good foundation of personal health and well-being.

Once a year, they recharge at the management meeting.

Dr. Deepak Chopra, Jack Canfield and TV personality Deborah Norville led the charge this year. Chopra offered insight into achieving the spontaneous fulfillment of desire. Canfield, the co-author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, offered an approachable method for making change. And Norville closed the meeting by reminding participants to appreciate the gifts in their lives.

Appreciating the people, from part-time dishwashers to executive officers, should always be a significant part of a company's culture. We know that improving the health and personal well-being of employees improves the health and personal well-being of our clients.

The numbers back us up. Our earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA) posted a 73 percent increase from 2006 to 2007. Our annual employee turnover of 23 percent to 45 percent compares with an industry average of 120 percent, as reported by the Assisted Living Federation of America. This unprecedented

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rate translates into a better bottom line for the company and more consistent care for its residents.

AegisLiving annually ranks as one of the best Washington companies to work for, earns high consumer reviews, enjoys steady profits and continues to grow.

Each employee has regular opportunities to form our practices, offer suggestions and constructive critiques, and make decisions about how best to serve. We strive in small and large ways to empower our people.

That means providing benefits – over and above medical coverage and investment benefits – that

allow employees and their families to get and stay healthy, enjoy balanced lives and continue to learn. These "soft" benefits are geared to making our employees more satisfied with their jobs. They include exercise facilities, massages, haircuts and home-cooked meals for themselves and their families.

Through negotiation with our vendors, we're able to offer meaningful perks: from pizza parties and movie nights to vendor discounts on home mortgages, medical supplies and groceries. In every vendor negotiation or other new step, we look for potential employee benefits.

When life throws our employees challenges, our Potato Soup Foundation is there to help. We stick with our people through major illnesses and disasters like mashed potatoes sticking to a wooden spoon.

Cultivating a people-centered corporate culture takes intention, effort and creativity, but it isn't difficult. Discovering how to incorporate the benefits of reflexology into our landscaping or what kinds of yummy healthy foods to offer in our cafe are the fun considerations of management.

While it may seem more essential to treat caregiving employees with care, imagine the difference happier and healthier workers could make for your business. When a salesman sees himself as part of something beyond the capitalistic goals of a retailer or an engineer understands her role as a significant part of a network, then a job becomes a calling. It creates a loyalty bond that runs deeper than most, not only to the company but to each other.

How do your employees experience your corporate vision?

Dwayne Clark is founder, chairman and chief executive officer of AegisLiving.