



# The Wisdom of Potato Soup

*A fun and caring environment has helped boost Aegis Assisted Living to the top of the large company category.*

**IN** Dwayne Clark's office, amid the trappings of success, pictures of his family, and his collection of sports memorabilia, sits a plaque that is etched with the words "Potato Soup."

The CEO and co-founder of Aegis Assisted Living, a senior housing owner and operator, tells a story of his childhood to help explain the plaque's meaning and it's power to crystallize his business philosophy.

Clark says that one time, while going to high school in Walla Walla, he and his

his mother told him to never forget where he came from and what they had to do. She also told him to "be there for your employees and they will always be there for you."

Those words have helped Aegis jump to the top spot on this year's Best Companies To Work For list in the large company category (1,000 employees or more). In the

last five years, Aegis has grown at warp speed, from starting its first senior housing complex to running 29 today. And the company's revenue have risen 23,000 percent during that period.

One of the keys to the company's growth has been to always put the needs of the staff first, Clark maintains.

"My big thing in forming Aegis was to have a really incredible culture," Clark says in his rapid-fire manner. "Your staff is the vehicle that drives you to the customer. Unless those people are absolutely delighted and motivated and have a really good feel-

ing about working for the company, you're never going to get to the customer."

Always putting the staff first is a mantra at Aegis. And it has to be because assisted living work can be physically demanding, often emotionally difficult, and sometimes unpleasant. Yet, the average pay for

a staff member is not much more than \$9 an hour. The benefit package is also not top-flight. Clark, himself, gives his company benefit package a C-plus grade.

Clark says that is one reason why the industry's average annual employee turnover rate at a facility is about 115 percent.

But Aegis has tried to take those industry negatives and turn them into positives for the company by offering a whole series of perks that make good employees want to come and stay.

One such perk is the so-called "soft benefits," such as reduced-rate haircuts at the Aegis salons and take-home meals for employee families.

Managers also make a point to always try to get breaks for their staff from vendors or businesses working with the senior homes. That may mean a reduced price from a grocery store or free checking at a bank.

Another important philosophy at Aegis is to communicate everything possible as soon as possible. But the discussion must go both ways, with employees able to tell managers how better to run the operation. Clark has put into place regular meetings with line staff that allow them to share ideas. If ideas are used, the employees get full credit.

Fun is also an important part of every Aegis facility. Every facility creates a committee of employees that is given a budget and instructed to make "fun" a daily occurrence. This happens all the way up to headquarters.

Such office tomfoolery includes shutting down headquarter for go-cart racing. Another time, the entire staff went to a Seattle Mariners baseball game.

"Our goal is to create an atmosphere where people jump out of bed in the morning to come to work. If we can delight our employees and get them excited about the place they work, then that is going to turn into a tremendous value for our customers," says Clark.



Dwayne Clark has created an employee-friendly work environment at Aegis.

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divorced, but proud and ethical mother were so poor, she had to steal a dozen potatoes from her employer so they would have something to eat. For a solid week, they ate potato soup and his mother taught him a lesson that has stuck with him.

Clark says that one night during dinner,