

5 Tips to Improve Employee Engagement and Retention

There's trope in senior living that working in a community is "like being part of an extended family." In fact, I hear it all the time from many long-time employees. And while it may at times feel that way, in order to do the work of a community effectively and efficiently we must always strive to maintain a professional environment.



*Justin Weber, senior vice president
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That being said, our staff comes to work every day with a heightened sense of purpose. Serving our residents as we do is a true calling that's rewarded with admiration and appreciation in a way that's beyond anything I've seen before in my career. Although I have held different roles throughout my career, I never saw or felt the sense of purpose that working as an executive director holds.

While I was at Casa de Mañana, staff focused on total resident satisfaction and not just getting their task done. If a driver spots someone walking home they stop and offer a ride. If someone sees a resident who looks down or worried, he or she asks how they can help, regardless of their role on the team. Residents celebrate the graduation of our employees from college and inquire about what we do on our time off. All of these small examples are simple ways that employees and residents care for each other as people and celebrate each other with genuine interest.

This commitment gets even stronger when our residents are experiencing difficult times. Our staff and residents support those who are struggling, encircling them with support, kindness and love. In the past year we've had three resident couples lose a spouse. To witness the care they receive from

residents and staff is simply amazing and couldn't be replicated outside of a community setting.

Fostering this level of staff engagement, however, doesn't just "happen." It takes deliberate work from all levels of an organization. Here are my top five suggestions to keep employees engaged, fulfilled and committed to working with your team for as long as possible:

- **Direct supervisors in each department must engage multiple times on every shift with their employees.** It is the supervisor who often drives the shift-by-shift satisfaction of employees so their relationship and open communication is key. I encourage managers to start every shift by greeting employees, checking in the middle of the shift to ensure they have everything they need and seeing if are any issues to be resolved. Then, thanking them before they leave for the day. It seems so basic but many supervisors are promoted based on their good performance in the department as front-line staff, and not all supervisors have had much (or any) management/leadership training.
- **Provide every employee with as much autonomy as possible.** Most people want the ability to dictate his or her own personal situation as much as possible. The more decision-making power employees have in their job the more ownership they take and the more accountability/pride they will show for their work.
- **Be tender with people and tough on standards.** There will always be issues that arise over the course of time. How you treat employees when they've made a mistake is equally (if not more) important than how you treat them when they are performing well.
- **Encourage constant learning and training at all levels.** Proactive learning and training is an investment in your employees and if done well becomes a job benefit that isn't quantified in a compensation package. It also stretches people and helps them grow.
- **Celebrate the small victories.** This is especially important in a business like ours that never closes. We are only as good as our last shift worked and all positive momentum can be slowed by one action that could occur at any time on any shift. So, when you do have a success, it must be celebrated and shared and all who took part should be recognized for their efforts. It's also crucial to ensure the entire team is made aware of community-wide recognition and praised for their role in making it happen.

- Justin Weber is the senior vice president of sales and marketing for Front Porch. Prior to his current role, Justin was executive director at Casa de Mañana, a Front Porch retirement community in La Jolla.