

## **Employee Satisfaction Leads to Stability in an Unstable Environment**

BLOOMFIELD, CT, Nov. 10, 2009 -- Today's fickle investment and real estate market can have a particularly significant impact on retirement communities. Yet, Duncaster, Greater Hartford's first such retirement community, is enjoying good stability despite the market. The reason for Duncaster's success? Its people, according to its president and CEO.

"While there are multiple factors for our stability and success, the cornerstone certainly lies with our employees, some of whom have been with us since we opened our doors," explains Michael O'Brien, Duncaster's President and CEO. "Beyond our business model and physical location, a retirement community such as ours is all about creating a wonderful experience for the people who've chosen to make their homes here. Our employees are the key to that."

O'Brien, who has 25 years of healthcare leadership experience, including serving as president and CEO of the Connecticut Alliance for Long Term Care (CALTC), believes that in today's environment, leaders would do well to claim the power of a strong employee base in helping their organizations and businesses weather the storm.

"We're in the people business. There's no question that our employees are the very essence of our mission at Duncaster. They are close to our residents on a daily basis and these relationships are crucial. Whether a person works in housekeeping, provides healthcare, or serves in the dining room, he or she has the power to take us to greater levels of excellence," says O'Brien. "And excellence is part of the backbone of stability."

Since arriving at Duncaster in 2007, the affable and approachable O'Brien began putting into place a strategy that centers on building trust and shared values among the not-for-profit's 285 employees. "I have two goals: high resident satisfaction and high employee satisfaction. You need both – if you don't have the latter, you can't have the former. It's that simple."

O'Brien set out to encourage transparent, two-way communication by surveying employees annually on their experiences and perspective, meeting personally with employees every month and sharing information about the organization's goals, occupancy, and financial performance. Employees need to know the organization's goals and how their role fits into that, he says. "They also need to know are being heard and understood. Their input is very valuable. They need to be celebrated and appreciated." To that end, the organization hosts a formal holiday staff party, yearly service awards, performance awards and many departmental celebrations of all kinds.

Valerie Santos, Duncaster's human resources director, says employee turnover at Duncaster is low for the industry. She believes that Duncaster's culture of respect and honest communication is among the reasons for that longevity. "Mike knows every employee by first name, something most CEOs don't choose to do. It's a good indicator of how much time he spends interacting and listening."

O'Brien likes to host small group luncheons for staff with a relaxed, informal atmosphere, no agenda and a rule that whatever comes up stays in the room. "I ask about family and outside interests because it helps us to know each other better. And I always ask, 'What do you like about working at Duncaster? What can we do to make working at Duncaster better? And, what draws you here?' The answer to that last question is often: 'I like helping people. If I can help someone it makes my day.'"

That response is one of the keys to Duncaster's success, affirms O'Brien, who says that in a service business, it's critical to hire and retain people with values that are compatible to the organization's. "There needs to be a real sense of purpose in their work because what they do has an effect on the lives of our residents. They are the reason for the work we do."

O'Brien says his organization's pro-employee strategy is backed by research within the healthcare industry affirming that investing in staff leads to improved job performance, higher resident satisfaction and better clinical outcomes. "It's well proven through research that this results in increased financial performance," he says.

In other words, it's the people who make the difference.

### **About Duncaster**

Duncaster is Bloomfield's signature retirement community. Celebrating 25 years, this campus of 190 independent residences, assisted living and Duncaster's Caleb Hitchcock Health Center is designed to help residents live life to the fullest by providing security and fulfillment. The community includes an aquatic and fitness center and an on-site health clinic. Residents can participate in ongoing education, social and cultural programs. For more information, see [www.duncaster.org](http://www.duncaster.org) or call (860) 380-5005.

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