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# RETHINKING THE MISSION OF LONG-TERM CARE

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If you work in the long-term care or assisted living segment of the healthcare industry, it's rare to be asked what business you are in.

That's because people make assumptions about the industry. Some of these assumptions are on the money, but many of them are not. For example, lay people often assume that assisted living is only about the care of seniors in the tradition of "old age homes" and all that has meant to them. That assumption certainly applied to me when I was invited to join the Board of Directors at Sunny Vista Living Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

The important rehabilitation role that long-term care provides and its vital function in assisting seniors with life's day-to-day challenges were not something that had occurred to me. My background in business dictated that I would look at assisted living from a business perspective. One of the things that I know is that effective companies know the mission they serve and keep it front-of-mind at all times.

With assisted living, the mission is a contribution to society and that contribution is successful aging. Successful aging is much more than a buzz word; it is three categories of behavior identified in a seminal study of the aging process. The study's authors differentiate between two concepts of aging; namely, usual and successful: The latter does not accept the former and its traditional markers of aging – heart disease, loss of mental acuity, infirmity – as given. Instead, it defines success as: low risk of disease and disease-related disability, high mental and physical function, and active engagement with life. The following figure summarizes the dynamics of successful aging.

## THE SUCCESSFUL AGING MODEL

Successful aging is at the intersection of the three categories of behavior. There is some order to the categories in that freedom from disease and disability enable mental and physical function which, in turn, facilitates active engagement with life. Ideally, assisted living facilities contribute mightily to successful aging through medical care, nutrition, physical and mental exercise, empathy and compassion. But there is one thing missing from the equation; namely, the motivation to participate in a successful aging lifestyle on the part of residents.

## BELONGING, SIGNIFICANCE AND SUCCESSFUL AGING

Imagine yourself being plunked down in the middle of nowhere. You've never been there before and accurately sense that your survival is far from certain. In short, you're in a world of hurt and quickly come to the conclusion that you need help. Our ancestors came to this conclusion the hard way. First, they noticed how their numbers dwindled whenever they ventured into the forest alone. It didn't take them long to recognize that the larger, stronger and faster animals sharing

their space were making their friends and family a mainstay of their diet. The second clue was the speed with which they dove behind their mother's legs when threatened. The writing on the wall was clear: We cannot make it alone and, therefore, are driven to belong. We willingly join a group and work hard to fit in because it enhances the likelihood of our survival.

But this is not all there is to the story of our enthusiasm for joining. We've had to deal with a troubling fact of our lives: we think about the future. Unlike virtually all other species, we are burdened with concerns about the future and aware that we worry about it. A big weight that comes with this insight is that we understand that we were born only to die. Among all of God's creatures, we are the only ones who contemplate our own demise – and we don't like what we see. If we do not hold them at bay, these thoughts can make us crazy; indeed, not being able to do so is a common explanation for mental illness.

So, rather than go crazy, we cope by constructing a parallel reality along the lines of "somehow the world would be less without me being in it." In short, we are compelled to believe that we are significant. And to prove it, we buy a more expensive car than our transportation needs alone would justify, decorate ourselves with clothes and jewelry and seek praise from the people around us. We do what we must do: validate that we belong and are significant.

## GROWING OLDER

The next big bump in the population that assisted living draws from are the baby boomers. When it comes to aging, they have nothing on the generations that preceded them or, for that matter, the ones who will follow them. The majority of their years are behind them and unless they do something about it, they will not only be most of their years, but also their best years. That task is successful aging, and something that assisted living facilities can contribute to do on behalf of their residents.

In contrast to successful aging, usual aging is isolating and very often depressing. Seniors reverse roles with their children, feel excluded and begin to have health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes and hearing loss, which can result in mild forms of paranoia. They enter a waiting rather than an active period of their lives. For this reason, you may have difficulty getting some of your residents to do the things that would make their lives better and put their best years before them such as taking their medications. The motivation to move toward successful aging is not what you might think – activities, hairdressers, manicures, bingo, day trips, exercise, and so forth. Instead, it is doing what you can to directly impact your residents' sense of belonging and significance.

## BUILDING BELONGING AND SIGNIFICANCE

Parents typically address this need without being aware of its existence because children insist upon it being addressed. And if it is not, the child is less likely to grow into a healthy adult. So you praise, cuddle, comfort and include them; tape their drawings on the refrigerator and generally make the child the center of your life. As we grow older, we do not outgrow this need, but praise, cuddling, comfort and inclusion take other forms. What we want for our residents is the experience of belonging and significance.

## GETTING TO BELONGING AND SIGNIFICANCE

The first step to building a sense of belonging and significance among your residents is with a clear understanding of what it is. Therefore, I offer the following definitions of these needs: Belonging: Being accepted as a natural part of the group and having a feeling of happiness derived from a sense of security within the group.

Significance: Having a place within the group that is valued by other members and feeling that the group could not satisfactorily replace you with someone else.

These are powerful concepts and worthy targets, especially if you want to earn the admiration and love of your residents. But knowing the definitions of belonging and significance is only the first step. The remaining steps include:

1. Making belonging and significance among residents your primary goal.
2. Communicating this goal and its meaning to your staff.
3. Hiring staff who genuinely value addressing the need
4. Recasting the activities of your facility in terms of how well they serve the need.
5. Measuring whether you are addressing the need.

No doubt many of you have vision statements for your facility. The point is whether your vision addresses the need for belonging and significance from the residents' perspective. A simple test is to ask yourself whether your approach to resident care is in terms of activities or outcomes. That is, do you think "bingo night" or facilitating engagement with life and enhancing mental health? You should reconsider how you go about the process of creating a resident-based vision and need for belonging and significance-based activities.

The second point has to do with letting your staff in on the secret: we are in the business of successful aging and building our residents' sense of belonging and significance. Communication of what you are doing is common; less common is for leaders to communicate why they are doing something. In this instance, it is addressing an insatiable need of residents. Start with discussing the experience that your staff would want to have as a patient/resident. Ask them how they would want to feel. Ask them what they would need in order to feel that way. I

guarantee that the idea of belonging and significance will emerge. Then, ask them what the staff would need to do to create those sorts of feelings and experiences with the residents/patients. The third point has to do with hiring the right people. My experience in many industries tells me that the high turnover rate in the assisted living business is partly due to hiring the wrong people. The people you should hire have a drive to serve and care for others with profound compassion. They also have the drive to work as part of a team. If you are not hiring for these qualities, then addressing the need for belonging and significance will be all the more difficult. Creating this sort of work team is not a function of dollars, but hiring and training procedures.

With respect to the fourth point, in my experience with creating differentiating strategies for companies – none of them in the assisted living business – one of the keys is to align processes and strategic activities in terms of a strategic goal. In the case of assisted living, the goal is successful aging through belonging and significance.

The final point is simply to measure what you treasure. If enhancing successful aging among your residents is your goal, then its achievement should be measured no matter how difficult it may seem at first. One of the key factors to measure is your residents/patients' sense of belonging and significance, as it is this sense that facilitates achieving the goal.

These points provide a good outline of how to move your facility toward being a source of successful aging and, along the way, to being a facility of choice in your community.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

More than 100 years ago, the philosopher-psychologist William James noted that everything about our humanity – every thought, feeling and action – is an effort to affirm our self-esteem. That is what Sally Fields did when she received an Oscar for her performance in the 1979 film “Norma Ray.” She trilled, “You like me! You really like me!” Some people were put off by her child-like expression of joy. Not me. I liked that she did openly what most of us do quietly: seek confirmation that we belong and are significant.

Whether it is fifty thousand years ago or today, this need persists as a basis for the motivation to be healthy. Residents who have it addressed are much more likely to participate in the life of your facility than residents who don't. A facility that affirms the sense of belonging and significance of its residents puts money in its bank of resident satisfaction and enthusiasm for the facility. Investing in the health of your residents can have a huge return on investment not only in resident satisfaction and life extension, but also by reducing cost and making it easier to staff and maintain resident and family engagement with your facility.



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