

Three steps to creating empowered cultures



Organizations that serve aging adults can increase revenue, cut costs and increase the life satisfaction of members by creating empowered cultures

by G. Richard Ambrosius, MA

“It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory.”

William Edwards Deming, PhD,
American quality expert (1900–1993)

The act of “retiring” can profoundly threaten a person’s sense of significance and may even influence future direction and life satisfaction. When an older adult loses a position and the recognition that

accompanies it, there may no longer be opportunities for that person to experience personal significance and satisfaction. For many, physical concerns regarding appearance, peak performance and memory also begin to color their attitudes toward themselves and their personal value. Some individuals simply accept the stereotypes and perceptions of aging as a time of decline, and begin a downhill slide. Their beliefs about aging and retirement all too often become self-fulfilling prophecies.

However, the size of the aging population offers both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations golden opportunities to increase revenue and cut costs, while increasing the life satisfaction of engaged consumers. Life’s second half will become a positive and joyful experience—an adventure in personal growth and fulfillment—for those involved with empowering organizations. To create empowered cultures, organizations need to develop both innovative and personally satisfying activities, opportunities for new relationships, and meaningful civic engagement for those they serve.

A three-step approach

The first step in creating an empowering culture is for organizational leaders to reconsider what they may have accepted earlier in life as fact about aging. If those serving older adults view later life as a time of loss and infirmity rather than growth and enrichment, they will have little success in creating an empowering culture. In the absence of enlightened leadership, organizations can unwittingly encourage dependency by planning every element of the programs, services and activities available. In doing so, these companies contribute to the stereotype of older adults as largely dependent.

Organizations can build an enlightened team by doing as much as possible to identify signs of real or subconscious ageism. With the amount of negative aging stereotypes perpetuated by the

media, it is not uncommon for people to have a negative aging bias. Still, few organizations test to identify bias, incorporate aging self-image as part of the interview process or require letters of recommendation from older adults not related to candidates.

Creating meaningful opportunities for leadership and service is the second step. A leadership team that has positive aging self-images and celebrates positive aging is more likely to involve older adults in the creation of services and the decisions that affect them—and not just as volunteers, but as members of an operating team that respects and encourages their opinions. Organizations can easily accomplish this the next time they need help by asking for resumés that detail experience in specific areas desired, rather than calling for volunteers.

It’s important, though, that organizations realize they cannot *empower* older adults, because they never had their power. Consumers are the ones with the real power. Recognizing and celebrating that reality is a critical step in organizational change. Remember, in our virtual world, news (both good and bad) can be shared instantly and even become viral, which can make or break organizations.

The third step? Remove barriers to participation by removing stereotypical words and phrases from your organization’s mission, communications and marketing materials.

Many older people view organizations that use stereotypical descriptive terms in their branding (such as *senior center* or *retirement community*) as threatening to personal significance and representing a shrinking world—service with restrictive, bureaucratic rules, and limited meaningful opportunities for service. To move to a “retirement community” or use “senior services” is to accept being classified as old or dependent. Even the amenities and variety of programs provided are lit-

tle compensation for perceived losses. Until organizations abandon exclusionary terms and embrace an ageless language of inclusion, they will be working at cross-purposes.

Dynamic, empowered cultures in practice

The experience of a pair of planned older-adult communities in Florida demonstrates how the three-step approach to creating empowered cultures works in practice.

The first community, Westcott Lakes in Tallahassee, recruited a professional staff that is committed to countering aging stereotypes and creating new opportunities for leadership by community members. While the bricks and mortar may be years away, a genuine community already exists. The leadership recognized and celebrated the wisdom and experience of community members by creating a Partnership Council of Advisors—with *partnership* being the key word. Once managers released “control,” it took less than six months for Westcott Lake members to assume leadership positions. Now, empowered community members are:

- producing their own newsletter
- organizing lifelong learning programs
- planning and hosting social events
- creating a library
- leading a brain fitness program

and more.

At the second community, The Glenridge in Sarasota, sales staff were challenged with a sales plateau due to the housing market crash and needed to generate more leads. Rather than asking for volunteers, leaders announced opportunities in a newly created Ambassador Program and asked members to apply by sharing their resumés and/or backgrounds in sales, marketing or community service. Applicants agreed to commit to not less than four hours a week staffing the Ambassador’s Desk and to attend a three-hour workshop. Over 40 members initially applied, and this program has now grown to more than 80 active members operating under their own public relations and marketing plan. The

Ambassador Program is run totally by Glenridge members. These individuals organize, host and staff special open houses for prospective members and fully “stage” the community during the event. Glenridge members also run the community’s lifelong learning program, including generating and controlling the budget.

The biggest barrier to creating an empowered culture is generally resistance from community leaders. More than one leader has commented, “But you seem to be endorsing something akin to letting the inmates run the institution.” The reality is that many consumers of services are capable of running an organization equally as well as current management; however, most are no longer interested in running a marathon, but would like to be entrusted with a sprint now and then.

The key to creating a dynamic, empowered organization is to tap the imagination of both older adults and staff. It is sad that organizations fail to capitalize on the thousands of years of wisdom and life experience they have access to in their members, all at no cost.

Creating community is an ongoing process

As biologist Charles Darwin once explained, it is not the strong that survive, but those who can adapt to change. What is true in nature is also true in creating empowered organizations.

Aging services generally, and senior living specifically, is riding a tsunami of change. It is both an exciting and treacherous time. To adapt, leaders must remember that creating community does not end with the construction of buildings; rather, it is an ongoing process—or should be. In Japan, this process is called Kaizen.¹

When creating communities for older adults, the process should begin well in advance of constructing the buildings. Future members can start creating community by investing time and talent in productive service that benefits other people, such as teaching classes, chairing programs, organizing clubs, planning

trips, editing member newsletters, and more. This positive culture influences others to continue to be productive and influential.

Positive aging celebrates the uniqueness and worth of each individual and encourages older adults to discover the joy that comes from giving—from using their time and talents to improve the lives of others and make a difference in the world around them. Through the mindful creation of empowered organizations that support positive aging, later life may again become celebrated as the crown jewel of the human experience.☺

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Reference

1. Kaizen is a Japanese philosophy that focuses on continuous improvement throughout all aspects of life. When applied to the workplace, Kaizen activities continually improve all functions of a business, from manufacturing to management and from the CEO to the assembly line workers.

Mark your calendar

At the Seventh Annual International Council on Active Aging Conference in Orlando, Florida, Dr. Chris Mulrooney of Westcott Lakes will join G. Richard Ambrosius to present a session on creating community. Mulrooney will share practical insights on how he has involved members in meaningful, empowered ways, while Ambrosius will discuss why removing stereotypical terms from descriptive designations is important to creating a positive culture. This session will take place on Friday, December 4, 2009, from 4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. For details, visit the “Conference” section at www.icaa.cc, or call ICAA toll-free at 866-335-9777.