



## *Executive Directors: Have a Plan and a Sense of Humor*

**Annamarie Mariani-Huehn**

I had a 1-year plan: run an assisted living (AL) community for at least 12 months, add it to my resume, and move on. So far, that plan is 7 years overdue, and I wouldn't change a day of it (a couple of hours here and there, maybe). When asked how (and why) I've stayed at the same community with the same company for 7 years and been successful, I consistently respond: have a plan and a sense of humor.

I am a structured soul by nature. Some call it "extremely ownership oriented." Regardless, the first steps any executive director should consider are an inventory of resources, established criteria, and follow through. Seems simple, doesn't it? I hear it can even take less than 7 years. An inventory of resources includes managers, line staff, amenities, and the physical plant. I focused on finding managers who were "experts" in their field and showed compassion and an ability to learn quickly. An "expert" for me is someone who not only has specific knowledge, but can apply that knowledge with a vision. So, I didn't specifically require a registered nurse as my director of nursing or an accountant as my business manager. I looked for people with qualifications and relevant experience, but hired people who expressed a calling to care for seniors as family. Those managers then hired line staff who were qualified, showed compassion, and had an ability to learn quickly. Yes, you do see a self-fulfilling prophecy here! Finally, I took inventory of the impression that our amenities and physical plant made and emphasized the positive aspects of both.

The second task of establishing criteria for admission and discharge came directly from my resources assessment. I asked many questions: What do we want the resident to be able to do for himself or herself? Should he or she be able to ambulate, transfer with the assistance of 1 person, or be independent in activities of daily living (ADLs)? What services can my staff provide at a consistently high level? Do I have enough staff to provide incontinence care, 6 hours of activities, and 24-hour nursing supervision? What services will I choose not to offer because I cannot provide them at a consistently high level—a modified diet or a 2-person transfer, for example? The answers to these questions became the criteria to be used for admissions and discharges. Then, I did the hardest and most dramatic thing of all—I actually applied these criteria to every admission and discharge! The decisions have not always been easy. But I have found that when I tried to apply the "spirit" of the criteria and not

the actual criteria, the outcome was not in the best interest of the resident, the family, the staff, or my community. Each year, we review our admission and discharge criteria. We discuss what we have learned throughout that year about how well we delivered our services. Then we modify the criteria, again based on our resources. Over the past 7 years, by defining the resident who we could care for well, I have been able to increase full-time employees (FTEs), increase profit margins, and establish a reputation for providing excellent care.

In all honesty, it wasn't the resource analysis and establishment of an admission and discharge criteria that have kept me in the executive director position. The key has been having a sense of humor—humor that recognizes a person's dignity and maintains respect has been the most effective de-stressor in this job. I have found that humor has a longer memory than adversity. It is the glue that keeps us connected and grounded.

Over the past 7 years, I have had "family" members who were the first female Brigadier General, an author, an NASA engineer, and a former CIA operative. These and other residents have provided me with memories of many humorous events. I was once asked to assist a resident in retrieving another resident from the bathroom because he was having "difficulty with his male ornaments." I have helped install a phone in a resident's apartment who reported that her daughter was "in Siberia, or one of those cold states." I have witnessed a resident doing gymnastics in my lobby to the accompaniment of a repetitious Chopin opus. I cherish each of these memories and the residents who created them for me. In fact, I keep a running journal of happenings, written "soap opera" style with embellishments to protect the innocent. This journal is on the "must read" list of all of my managers and many of my professional colleagues who recount similar experiences.

Though my original plan has been modified, I'm not yet finished with my work in AL. As long as I keep true to the belief that I am making a difference in the lives of residents and staff, someday someone will be writing a journal about my antics. In fact, I have the first entry: "I used to run one of these places, and you're doing it all wrong!"

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