

Culture chief

Chicago-based Enlivant recently was recognized as a Great Place to Work for the second year in a row. CEO Jack Callison spent time with McKnight's Senior Living Editor Lois A. Bowers discussing the important role culture plays in an organization's success.

Q: How long has Enlivant participated in the Great Place to Work program, and why do you believe programs like it are important?

A: Last year was our first year of seeking certification, and we were thrilled to be certified. What's so wonderful and humbling about being recognized for the second year in a row is that it's our employees who said that Enlivant is a Great Place to Work. This is something that you just can't campaign for or buy. It's a confidential online survey where employees are asked to give their honest, unfiltered feedback about their own experience.

The data from the survey quantifies our organizational culture, it measures employee engagement and it helps us drive meaningful impact, which in turn helps build trust. Their feedback is invaluable to continuing our journey to becoming the nation's most trusted senior living provider, which is our ultimate vision for the organization.

Q: In the latest survey, employees ranked the organization very high in respect, pride and camaraderie. What steps has the company taken to foster those qualities?

A: Our core values, an acronym internally known as CHIEF, are



Photos: Enlivant

at the heart of everything we do as an organization. The CHIEF stands for compassion, humility, integrity, excellence, and fun. We believe that if you're making decisions and acting with our core values clearly as your "North Star," then you are making the right decisions and doing right by our employees, residents, their families and each other.

It all starts with hiring the right talent, people who are passionate about serving seniors. They're hardworking, smart and they have personality attributes that are consistent with our core values and our leadership competencies.

Q: You became CEO in 2013. How were the company's current mission, vision and values established, and have they evolved since that time?

A: It was clear to us then, as we were learning about the organization, that a very dramatic transformation was needed immediately. We were completely focused on building and rebuilding trust with all of our stakeholders. So to kick things off, we hosted CEO-led listening tours in communities all around the country. I started out by just simply asking for unfiltered input on Enlivant's culture. The great feedback led to a clear foundation.

You've got to have both a solid mission and vision and values to

have a strong and special culture. Over time, those have not evolved. That's not to say that we aren't constantly looking in the mirror and asking, "Could we be better?" We do that every day.

For instance, it's obviously been a very difficult few months of widespread outrage and protest calling for racial justice. We believe that our mission, vision and values demand that we take a stand to advance equity and diversity, inclusion and belonging in all forms. We also know that as an organization,

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we can and have to do more to make society a more equitable world for everyone to live and thrive and work in, to help inform our longer-term actions.

Our leadership team is currently focused on active listening and learning from our employees to facilitate that. We're hosting small-group sessions, via Zoom, designed exclusively to hear our employees' honest perspectives about their workplace experiences and identify where we can continue to work together to further improve our culture.

We've engaged with a third-party consultant, Robert Perkins, to help with our go-forward diversity, inclusion and belonging strategy. It will be a multiyear process that we're going through together as an organization, but we're incredibly excited to commence these listening sessions and engage with open hearts and minds in the spirit of learning and continuous improvement.

Q: What is the state of the diversity and inclusiveness of Enlivant's workforce?

A: We haven't disclosed anything publicly, but I can tell you that no matter where we are and where any company is, there's always room for improvement.

Q: What are the biggest reasons that culture is important, or should be important, to a senior living organization?

A: We are a people business, and we're a mission-driven organization. And our mission is to enrich lives through meaningful relationships and vibrant communities. That's why we exist. Every single organization should have a very clear purpose for why they exist.

Q: Enlivant now has 220 communities across 26 states. How does an organization ensure a consistent culture across all those communities and all those different states?

A: Hiring the right leaders at every



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level of the organization, and specifically, leaders who share our values, is imperative to our success. We have established leadership competencies at all levels to help us select, develop and retain our talent. Part of the hiring process includes an incredibly comprehensive assessment process. I hold myself and our leadership team to very high standards, frankly. And in turn, they hold their teams to the same high standards, and so on and so forth. Our employees see leadership at Enlivant walking the talk and living by our core values. We all set the example, and that starts with me as CEO.

Q: As you grow, how do you ensure that the culture is consistent?

A: As Enlivant has grown, we have used the same competency assessments with new employees that

we have used with our existing employees to ensure that they will be aligned with Enlivant “DNA.” This facilitates consistency in culture.

Q: Has the pandemic brought any challenges to maintaining the culture?

A: Interestingly, we've seen quite the opposite. I've never been more proud of our teams than I have been these past few months. Has it been easy for them? Absolutely not. This unprecedented pandemic has brought tremendous stress to people both personally and professionally, but we have truly seen our teams unite around our mission of protecting and caring for our residents and our employees and each other. They have quickly adjusted to our rigorous new protocols and safety practices in order to form a “moat of protection” around each

community. This teamwork has only reinforced our culture and made our core values an even bigger part of how we live every single day.

For the vast majority of our employees, working at Enlivant is so much more than just a job. For many, it's a passion, it's a calling and it's meaningful work that's completely aligned with their personal values and life purpose. We are all in this together, and I truly believe that we will emerge from this pandemic stronger than ever, culturally, as one unified and cohesive team because of what we have gone through and will have accomplished together.

Q: If you were to give advice to any of your peers about establishing and maintaining a healthy, strong culture, what would you advise them?

A: You can't underestimate the importance of that North Star that I talked about. Especially during a period like COVID, it's been very reassuring for me, our leadership team and our employees to have a framework that you can cling to.

Have a very clear sense of your purpose, your mission for why you exist and what it is that you're trying to accomplish. Define what long-term success looks like. That's your vision. What are the behaviors that you're going to embrace along the way? In our case, those are our values. It's so critically important that those are not just words on the back of a business card or a marketing brochure. It's got to be baked into the culture, and you have to get complete alignment on that.

Frankly, it starts with you as the CEO, and the leadership team, to not only develop a cohesive culture, but to ensure that you're holding yourself accountable to that culture and that you're then holding others accountable to it. Having a well-defined mission, vision and values that people understand and buy into and that you hold people accountable to is critically important. ■