



Insights

Report

The power of people-first leadership:

How investing in your team can drive stronger resident and business outcomes





Contributors



Choosing the right recruitment partner is essential for navigating today's evolving senior living landscape. You need a specialist who not only understands the sector's unique complexities but can also provide strategic guidance at every stage of the hiring journey.

With a dedicated team and extensive experience across the US senior living sector, Compass Associates is proud to support many of the industry's leading providers in securing transformational leadership talent. Our deep market insight combined with access to a strong network of candidates enables us to consistently deliver high-impact placements that drive performance, strengthen organizational culture, and support long-term sustainability.

The senior living team share more than 30 years recruitment experience dedicated to the sector – speak to the team today to learn how we can support you.



Executive Summary

As part of an ongoing series of community engagement sessions within the Senior Living industry, Compass Associates hosted a discussion with senior living executive leader COO Stephanie Hess, who shares her extensive experience and insights into building a strong team culture.

Stephanie is deeply committed to delivering high-quality care while ensuring the operational excellence and financial sustainability of senior living communities. With extensive experience across Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Michigan, she has led initiatives in acquisitions, turnarounds, design, development, and construction that have enhanced community performance and resident outcomes.

Stephanie is passionate about strengthening people and culture practices within the senior living sector. In our discussions, she highlights that senior living should be viewed primarily as a people-centered industry, rather than just a real estate business – a perspective that shapes her leadership approach and vision for the future.



Stephanie Hess
Chief Operating Officer, Mimi Senior Living

Connect

Stephanie has successfully revitalized underperforming properties by improving operational efficiency, implementing cost-saving strategies, and rebuilding management teams, consistently transforming communities into thriving, profitable assets while maintaining a strong focus on resident well-being. In addition, she has overseen the full lifecycle of new Assisted Living, Independent Living, and Memory Care developments, from site selection to operational launch, ensuring they are designed and built to the highest standards with residents and staff in mind.

Throughout her career, Stephanie has navigated industry challenges such as staffing shortages, regulatory shifts, and evolving resident needs, while consistently delivering sustainable results for both residents and organizations. Her recent work at Mimi Senior Care reflects a steadfast dedication to strengthening the senior living experience for all stakeholders.



Enhanced Resident Care & Satisfaction

- Employees who feel valued and supported are more motivated and attentive so a culture emphasizing teamwork, accountability, and empathy translates into higher-quality interactions with residents.
- Strong culture reduces errors, improves responsiveness, and fosters a safer, more personalized care environment.

Improved Staff Retention & Reduced Turnover

- Senior care faces high turnover rates due to stress, long hours, and emotionally demanding work.
- A positive culture characterized by respect, recognition, and professional growth opportunities keeps staff engaged and reduces turnover costs.
- Retaining experienced caregivers maintains consistency in resident care, which is critical for health outcomes.

Stronger Leadership & Accountability

- Leaders who model transparency and ethical behavior create teams that respond effectively to challenges, including staffing shortages, regulatory changes, and resident needs.

Operational Efficiency & Performance

- Transparent communication and trust empower staff to address problems quickly and collaboratively.
- A positive culture encourages innovation, proactive problem-solving, and cross-functional cooperation. Operational initiatives (such as implementing new care protocols or technologies) are more successful when employees are aligned with organizational goals.

Financial & Strategic Advantages

- Enhanced care quality can improve regulatory compliance, reputation, and occupancy rates. Lower turnover and higher staff engagement reduce recruitment and training costs.
- Investors and partners often value organizations with strong culture, seeing them as more sustainable and resilient.

Better Recruitment & Employer Brand

- Senior care organizations with a reputation for strong culture attract higher-caliber candidates.
- Prospective employees seek workplaces with supportive leadership, career development, and a positive environment.
- This allows organizations to hire not just for skill, but for alignment with mission and values.

Introduction

"We believe it is essential for the senior living community to share expertise across all functions and address common challenges, so we can collectively benefit from each other's experiences in this ever-evolving sector. With that goal in mind, we have developed this report, and others in this series, to help strengthen our community of leaders through shared knowledge."

By welcoming contributions from accomplished professionals across diverse disciplines, we provide a comprehensive exploration of the critical issues facing the sector. We also seek to highlight prevailing

obstacles and offer actionable insights to overcome them, supporting the continuous growth, advancement, and resilience of our industry.

For those growing teams and building employment culture, this report delivers guidance grounded in real-world experience from a capable and passionate leader within the senior living space. We hope you find the conversation both valuable and thought-provoking."

*Thank you,
Compass Associates*



Why leadership teams should be prioritizing a people-first approach to Senior Living



"The senior living sector should always be defined as a people-centric business rather than slipping into becoming purely a real estate venture. Hiring practices that prioritize both technical expertise and genuine commitment to the mission of care have proven essential in creating resilient teams and maintaining operational excellence."

Stephanie Hess

Successful senior living organizations are built on strong workplace cultures, where transparency, accountability, and open communication are central to effective leadership. A positive culture not only supports staff engagement and retention but also ensures consistent delivery of quality care. Addressing toxic behaviors quickly and maintaining trust within teams are critical components of sustaining performance.

Industry trends highlight the growing importance of the regional operator model, which enhances care delivery through local engagement and responsiveness. Strategic initiatives such as joint ventures and expansion into key states leverage existing operational knowledge and compliance capabilities, strengthening both efficiency and quality outcomes.

Aligning business priorities with investor expectations remains a key factor in driving sustainable growth. Strong partnerships built on a shared commitment to care and purpose continue to distinguish high-performing organizations in the senior living sector.

Therefore it is clear that a strong employer culture within senior care organizations have significant and measurable benefits, both for staff and residents.



Key considerations for implementing a positive culture within senior living:

Our discussion highlights how rushed hiring decisions can have detrimental effects on team morale and overall business success. It emphasizes the importance of building a strong workplace culture and explores practical ways leadership teams can drive meaningful improvements.



"I think retention must start with hiring the right people. If you hire the right people to begin with, that will keep the culture from the start. Do they acknowledge a resident when you pass them in the hallway? Do they acknowledge a team member? If they don't do the simple little things, I don't think they have the heart for the business."

A considered approach to early hiring strategies

There are many risks associated with hasty hiring decisions and a bad hire can disrupt team dynamics as well as overall business performance. That means early observations are key at hiring stages.

Observing how potential hires interact with residents and staff is essential in determining their fit for the organization. There should be a large focus on investing time in initial hiring strategies to ensure that the right people are brought into the team.

Minimize the risks of a bad hire

Consistency in caregiving plays a vital role in fostering a sense of security and comfort among residents. Frequent changes in care staff can disrupt residents' routines and sense of home, leading to uncertainty and emotional distress. Leadership teams need to put effective strategies in place to make sure retaining staff is prioritized, such as onboarding and training.



"I've learned over the years that this business is about people. A lot of people talk about this business, frequently now that it's a real estate business. And to me, it's always been a people business first. We work with people, we're caring for people, we are people. And if you can really focus on the people, it will drive your performance and lead you to success. I truly believe that."

Managing change and maintaining morale

Explaining the "why" behind the change makes it much easier for staff to support new initiatives when they understand the rationale, goals, and expected benefits. Leadership should foster a clear, consistent messaging style to reduce uncertainty and prevent misinformation. Two-way communication will allow space for questions, feedback, and emotional reactions which can then be managed appropriately.



"Being present, being with them, letting them know why you're doing what you're doing is where success is going to come from. There's so much uncertainty, especially during COVID. We didn't know what was going to happen tomorrow, a week from now, you know, months from now. And so just being present, being honest, being part of the team is how me and my team got through COVID. We didn't use agency staffing. We were adamant."

Encouraging compassion in communications

Personal connections and communication in fostering a committed team are paramount. Observing how potential hires interact with residents and staff is essential in determining their fit for the organization. There should be a large focus on investing time in hiring, onboarding, and training to ensure that the right people are brought into the team.

"I tell my husband how lucky I am to be able to say to my team, that I love these folks. These are not just fellow co-workers to me. They matter to me and I matter to them. And I think that foundation is really

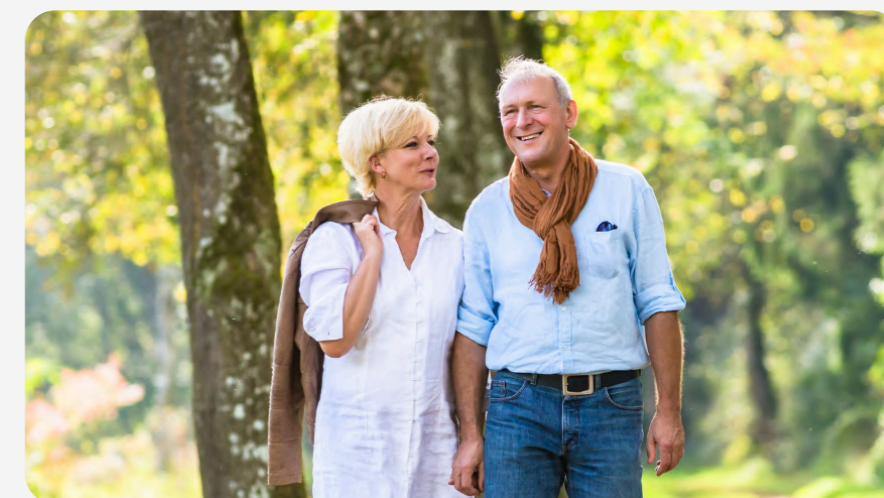
easy to lean on when times are tough. I had already demonstrated that I would stand side by side with them if they'll stand side by side with me. And the rest of the team, and that's what they do."

Building a sustainable and transparent management philosophy

A "boots on the ground" approach to work is important when looking to build solid foundations, which allows the team to face challenges effectively. A strong foundation is essential for long-term success and stability in any business. Sustainability is crucial in management practices as short-term strategies can harm long-term success.



"Transparency is meaning what I say and saying what I mean consistently. And again, being present and answering questions, whatever that might be. If I don't know the answer, say that. I won't always have all the answers. But I'm certainly capable of writing down the question, getting back to them, following through with what I say that I'm going to do."



Creating a culture of trust and accountability within team dynamics

There is a huge value in transparency and accountability when building trust within a team and admitting mistakes can encourage open communication. Fostering a philosophy of maintaining a culture that distinguishes itself by not only stating a commitment to care but also demonstrating it through action.

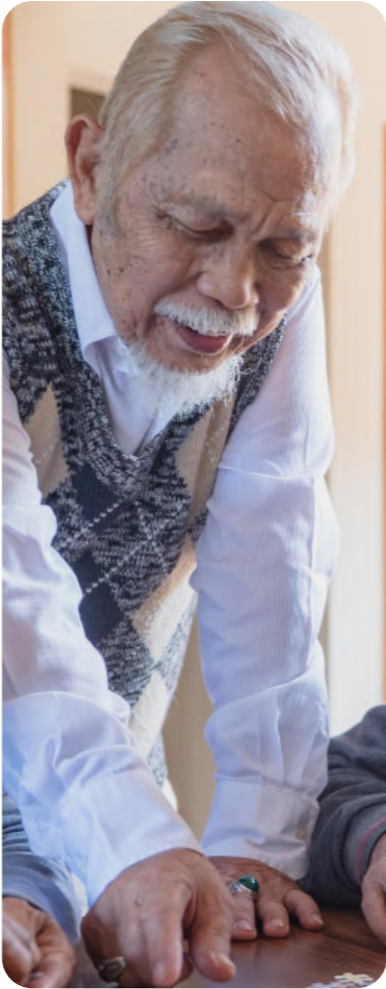
“I have a lot of tough decisions to make as a leader of an organization. And sometimes I make great decisions and sometimes I quite frankly make poor decisions when it comes to taking care of my people. But having them humble me and tell me, and by listening to why they maybe weren't great decisions, I think has really infused a culture of where people are first and that I'm listening - I hear you. I respect you and I definitely want to take your input”

Committing to consistency

A strong workplace culture demands continuous attention and reinforcement. Without consistent effort, it can quickly erode, undermining organizational cohesion and performance. Effective leadership requires a steadfast commitment to upholding the organization’s values and ethos, ensuring that cultural consistency is actively nurtured and embedded in everyday practice.



“I mean, bad things happen to even good people. You know, because we are caring for people, it's unpredictable. And so bad things will and do happen. What I've always told my team is it's how we handle that situation that is a reflection of who we are and what we care about.”



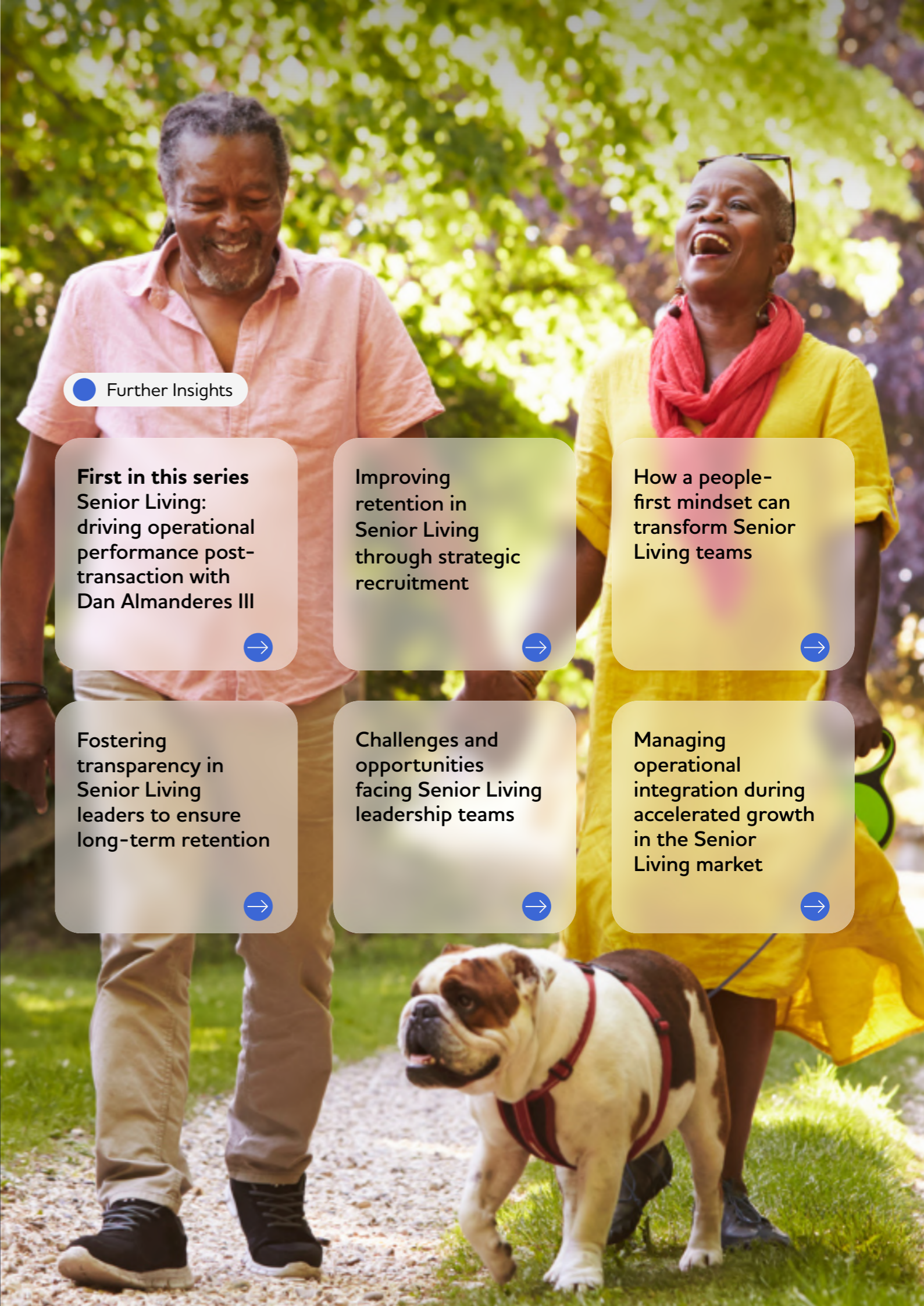
Conclusion

A strong employer culture is a core driver of operational success, care quality, staff stability, and long-term organizational sustainability in senior care. By fostering transparency, accountability, and a supportive work environment, leadership teams can improve staff retention, engagement, and performance. From a strategic perspective, organizations with a robust culture benefit from lower turnover costs, higher compliance and reputation

standards, and stronger investor confidence, making culture a central component of sustainable growth and long-term success in the senior living sector.

Full discussion available to watch now

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first mindset can
transform Senior
Living teams



Fostering
transparency in
Senior Living
leaders to ensure
long-term retention



Challenges and
opportunities
facing Senior Living
leadership teams



Managing
operational
integration during
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in the Senior
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