



# Respectful Relationships:

*The Heart of Better Jobs Better Care*

by Ingrid McDonald and Karen Kahn

**E**velyn Hyman was a direct care worker for 14 years. She enjoyed the relationships and the feeling of success: “When I left my clients and never came back, then I knew that I’d done my job. They were independent again. It was really rewarding for me to see that.” But Evelyn remembers when she first became a certified nurse aide (CNA). She worked in a nursing home, and says that she and her coworkers were not valued at all.

Regrettably, Hyman’s feelings are often echoed by direct care workers across long-term care settings. Workers say that their supervisors—and sometimes those they care for and, many times, their peers—don’t respect who they are or value the work they do. Seen as unskilled workers without a future, many are paid poorly, given inadequate training and offered far too little support to meet the complex challenges of caring for people with multiple physical, emotional and spiritual needs. Add to this the misunderstandings that result from differences in race, culture and class, and it’s not surprising that turnover rates among frontline workers average 70 percent or more in nursing homes and 40 to 60 percent in home care.

Today, these sky-high turnover rates undermine the ability of employers to provide the high-quality services consumers want and

“care gap” makes it imperative that long-term care providers address the challenges of recruiting and retaining direct care workers. Creating a respectful workplace that demonstrates that all employees are valued for their contributions to caregiving is essential to meeting that challenge.

### **Creating Respectful Environments**

BJBC, through its research and demonstration programs, identified multiple strategies for creating workplaces that are more respectful and for reducing turnover. Of course, with an increasingly diverse direct care workforce, improving communication and understanding across differences is critical. But equally important to retaining direct care workers is building a strong foundation of respect through supportive supervision, peer mentoring and team building. Direct care workers need opportunities to grow and learn and become leaders just as nurses and managers do. When treated as valued members of the care team, direct care workers become more valued employees.

### **Building a Foundation for Respect**

There is a saying that goes, “People don’t leave their jobs, they leave their supervisors.” A direct care worker’s relationship with his or her supervisor is often the most

Direct care workers not only have difficult, low-paying, frustrating jobs, they can also face negative perceptions (often from their own supervisors), inconsistent training, poor support and misunderstandings due to race, culture and class differences.

Better Jobs Better Care’s research and demonstration programs, the Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute and others have identified many strategies for creating “respectful workplaces” in which employees are supported and given opportunities to learn and develop leadership abilities.

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deserve. According to Better Jobs Better Care (BJBC) researcher Christine Bishop, “A resident’s satisfaction with his/her relationship to nursing staff was found to be significantly related to the proportion of CNAs on the resident’s unit who said they intended to stay in the job.” In addition, CNAs who felt their supervisors were calling on their knowledge of residents and who felt they had control over their work, were more likely to express a strong sense of responsibility toward residents they cared for, and experienced more job satisfaction.

This situation will only get worse as the nation’s population ages. The looming

influential factor in whether the worker feels valued and respected at work and decides to stay in the job. Thus, the National Commission on Nursing Workforce for Long-Term Care recommends long-term care employers adopt “a strong nurse leader/management model based in a less hierarchical approach that relies on coaching, mentoring and building high performing self-managed teams.”

Several organizations are promoting new models of supervision based on these principles, and are thereby laying the foundation for respectful workplaces around the country. For example, the

LEAP program—which stands for Learn, Empower, Achieve and Produce—focuses on “creating person-centered workplaces made up of supportive, empowered care teams,” says program co-founder Anna Ortigara, vice president, Campaign for Cultural Transformation for Life Services Network (LSN), AAHSA’s state association partner in Illinois. Nurses in the LEAP program—which was created by Mather-LifeWays and LSN—are trained to see themselves as “care-team leaders” rather than traditional supervisors.

At the Loveland Good Samaritan Home in Colorado, nurses who went through the



Cathedral Square Corporation

Cathedral Square Senior Living works to bridge cultural differences between its residents and its staff, many of whom are from other countries. Here, staff donned traditional Tibetan dress as part of a Summer Journey Around the World Program.

LEAP program developed better communication with their CNAs. The nursing home also implemented LEAP's level 2 CNA training, providing a career advancement opportunity for frontline staff. Level 2 CNAs, who receive a small pay increase, take on new responsibilities such as training, mentoring and participating in patient care committees and resident care conferences, making the care-team approach even more effective. When asked how being a level 2 CNA made a difference for her, one CNA responded, "I feel that I am important and that my coworkers and the management have trust in me and the job that I do and because of that I feel more empowered."

Northern New England LEADS (Leadership, Education and Advocacy for Direct Care and Support) also focuses on improving supervisory relationships and providing leadership and growth opportunities for direct care workers.

LEADS trains supervisors in a coaching approach to supervision, a model centered on building relationships with supervisees, constructively presenting and addressing problems, and helping workers develop problem-solving skills. The core of the approach is learning to listen attentively in order to understand the perspective of the worker when a problem arises. As a result, workers feel valued and respected, and managers are more successful.

LEADS participant Kathy McCollet, an assistant director of nursing at Edgewood Centre in Portsmouth, N.H., found that the coaching supervision training provided by the Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute (PHI) was invaluable. "I feel confident that I have the tools to help [workers] come to their own solutions. I no longer feel put on the spot to come up with a solution for them." She says she is already experiencing a decrease in the number of problems coming her way. By respecting their ability to find their own solutions, McCollet has given her staff greater confidence and as a result, they are willing to take greater responsibility for decision-making.

One of the most exciting aspects of the LEADS program, according to Ken Sandberg, chief operating officer of the Cedars in Portland, Maine, was the inclusion of direct care workers in each organization's culture change leadership team. "Being involved with LEADS has awakened our organization to the benefits of tapping into the voices and insights of our direct caregivers and support staff," says Sandberg. "It is inspiring to watch empowered staff rise

to the occasion, to get involved in making decisions, and to help shape new and better ways of providing the best quality care."

Both LEAP and LEADS demonstrate that showing respect for direct care staff means more than holding an annual dinner and awards night. It means providing real opportunities for workers to contribute at multiple levels within their organizations.

### Promoting Communication and Understanding Across Differences

Providing support and opportunities for direct care workers communicates that their supervisors value their contributions and respect who they are. For these inter-

ventions to be effective, however, organizations must also promote communication and understanding that breaks through the barriers of racial, ethnic and class differences. Many organizations are engaging in this work with their staff, but fewer have taken it on with residents as well. That is what is unique about the work done by Vermont's Cathedral Square Senior Living, a BJBC participant.

As Cathedral Square Senior Living's staff has become increasingly diverse, the organization felt a need to bridge the distance between direct care workers and the residents it cares for. "We thought providing education around cultural diversity for staff and residents would strengthen relationships," says Human Resources Director Kay Jarvis. As a result of these efforts, Jarvis says, staff and residents have "a deeper appreciation and understanding of everyone's differences ... It has helped us enhance our teamwork and made a friendlier work environment."

There are many ways to create respectful work environments, but first it is important to know what "respect" means to the people in your organization.

Maria Elena Del Valle, a New York-based training specialist with PHI, has been helping organizations improve communication, collaboration and cross-cultural communication for more than two decades. Central to her work, says Del Valle, is the understanding that "communication is the heartbeat of an organization and when it fails, the organization is in trouble. People need to make a commitment to get to know each other better."

Del Valle starts her work with long-term care organizations by having people talk to one another about what a respectful workplace is. During brainstorming sessions, Del Valle says, "People are surprised that they use the same language and all want the same thing. Phrases such as 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' and 'you give what you get' are universal. People from different cultures are delighted when they find out they share these cultural values and ideas about what respect is."

Once organizations have defined respect, interactive discussions and role playing allow people to explore the issues further. "Many times the behavior that causes people to feel disrespected is unintentional," says Del Valle. "Role-plays create an environ-

ment to help people see these behaviors from a different perspective and then talk about what is going on.”

At Cathedral Square Senior Living, role playing helped to tease out the issues at play among workers—many of whom are recent immigrants from Bosnia, Tibet and other developing countries—and the residents, who are low- and middle-income Vermonters. In one case, a humorous role-play opened up a discussion of how certain gestures and language felt disrespectful to staff.

“Humor and playfulness,” says Del Valle, “are an important part of the conversation because they let people’s defenses down and open up discussion.” In this case, staff were able to educate residents about how particular behaviors felt demeaning, even if that was not intended.

### Changing Practices to Promote Respect: Practical Suggestions


Putting new respectful practices into operation can be difficult. As part of her BJBC research, Boston University’s Victoria Parker studied how culturally diverse nursing homes go about this process. Parker describes how important it is for facilities to engage in continuous interventions and institutionalize responsibility for this work so that it lies with more than one person.

One of her most important findings showed that for an organization to be truly culturally competent, it must look beyond language and include nonverbal communication, food, music, religious practices and end-of-life customs. Workers feel more respected and valued in an organization they perceive as more culturally competent. Her research also found that managers and frontline workers often have significantly different perceptions of the cultural competence of an organization.

To get started, here are five practical suggestions:

- 1. Take a “relationships inventory.”** Examine the supervisory style within your organization and consider whether change is necessary. Would training in coaching supervision benefit your organization? Can you improve peer-to-peer relationships with mentoring or other team-building activities? Do residents show respect for the staff who care for them on a daily basis?
- 2. Listen to what workers say about respect.** Listening well is critical to laying a strong foundation for respect. Don’t presume you know what workers think. Listen with curiosity and without judgment. Then consider how to make improvements.
- 3. Think in terms of maximizing human potential.** Offer workers opportunities to learn and grow. Education and training are important, but so are opportunities to mentor, to participate in care teams, and to lead change efforts.
- 4. Identify changes necessary to “operationalize” respect.** Review policies and practices and look for ways to show workers they are respected, valued and heard. Pay special attention to how your organization responds to workers who feel they are being discriminated against because of their language, culture or race.
- 5. Commit to making continuous improvements.** There is no single, magic bullet to create a more respectful workplace.

Outside consultants will not “solve the problem.” It takes continued effort to create an environment that encourages people to listen, learn and participate.

Fortunately, one innovation to create a more respectful work environment is likely to lead to another as workers feel more empowered to articulate their needs and interests. An organization that implements the LEAP program or adopts a coaching-supervision model will open new lines of communication with workers that will point to other changes in practice or policy that also will be valuable in creating a culture of respect. Be intentional about making sure that this process is highly inclusive of staff at all levels, is recognized as an organizational priority, and continues over time. 

*Ingrid McDonald is a consultant to the Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute (PHI) with expertise in coalition building, long-term care policy and financing and direct care worker training. Karen Kahn is director of communications for PHI.*

## Resources

### Better Jobs Better Care

[www.bjbc.org](http://www.bjbc.org).

### **Stand Up and Tell Them: Views from the Frontline in Long-Term Care (video)**

Produced by Better Jobs Better Care, *Stand Up and Tell Them: Views from the Frontline in Long-Term Care* includes the story of Evelyn Hyman. It is available in videotape (\$15) or DVD (\$25) versions (the DVD includes both 25-minute and 10-minute versions). A discussion guide (\$10) is also available. E-mail Sherry Giles at [sgiles@aahsa.org](mailto:sgiles@aahsa.org) or call (202) 508-1216.

### Institute for the Future of Aging Services (IFAS)

[www.futureofaging.org](http://www.futureofaging.org).

### Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, Bronx, N.Y.

[www.paraprofessional.org](http://www.paraprofessional.org) or (718) 402-7766.

### National Commission on Nursing Workforce for Long-Term Care

The Commission’s final report, “Act Now for your Tomorrow,” can be downloaded from [www.futureofaging.org](http://www.futureofaging.org). Click on “Publications” and scroll down to the 2005 listings.

### LEAP Program, Mather LifeWays, Evanston, Ill., and Life Services Network, Hinsdale, Ill.

Contact: Anna Ortigara R.N., M.S., FAAN, vice president, Campaign for Cultural Transformation, [annao@lsni.org](mailto:annao@lsni.org) or (630) 325-6170. LEAP on the Web: [www.matherlifeways.com/re\\_leap.asp](http://www.matherlifeways.com/re_leap.asp).

### Loveland Good Samaritan Village, Loveland, Colo.

Contact: Marie Moran, R.N., SDC, [mmoran@goodsam.com](mailto:mmoran@goodsam.com) or (970) 669-3101 x276.

### Northern New England LEADS Institute

[www.paraprofessional.org/Sections/leads.htm](http://www.paraprofessional.org/Sections/leads.htm)

### The Cedars, Portland, Maine

Contact: Kenneth Sandberg, chief operating officer, [ksandberg@thecedarsportland.org](mailto:ksandberg@thecedarsportland.org) or (207) 775-4111

### Cathedral Square Corporation, Burlington, Vt.

Contact: Kay Jarvis, human resources director, [jarvis@cathedralsquare.org](mailto:jarvis@cathedralsquare.org) or (802) 863-2224.