

## Empathizing With Your Employees

By Cheryl Slavinsky

The customer always comes first, right? That depends on who you believe your customer is. There are internal customers and external customers, but at the end of the day, who's your top priority?

For Haim Dubitzky, MSM, principal and VP of performance excellence for The Palace Group, a South Florida privately-owned operator of senior living communities, the top customer is the employees.

"I know I butt heads with other owners, but my personal philosophy is 'employees first, residents next.' If you don't engage with the employees and get them engaged, you'll never reach the residents," said Dubitzky, one of two sons working in the family business founded, owned and operated by parents Helen and Jacob Shaham. "The employees do everything. If you're on the front line, fine, focus on the customer. But if you're sitting in an office, you're not [focused on the customer]."



Haim Dubitzky



Employee Pep Rally at The Palace Gardens

The Palace Group recently received the highest honor from Gallup—the prestigious 2018 Gallup Great Workplace Award. With humble beginnings in 1980 as a 21-bed assisted living facility, the company today serves over 1,500 residents and 1,100 employees in a continuum of care, including independent and assisted living, memory care, nursing & rehabilitation, home health and pharmacy services.

The Palace Group joins such prestigious worldwide companies as Mars Incorporated, USAA, Nationwide Insurance and Stryker Corporation in receiving this recognition. Of Gallup's 600 worldwide clients, only 39 companies and organizations were

recipients of the award. In Florida, The Palace Group is one of only three receiving this distinction—along with Sarasota Memorial Health Care System and Hueman People Solutions—and the only senior living organization worldwide.

"It's truly validating to receive such a prestigious award and an honor to be recognized among the top workplaces globally," said Dubitzky. "We pride ourselves on being innovators and setting the highest standards for senior living. The commitment of our staff is the major reason for our success. They are passionate and creative and truly care about each other, our residents and families we serve."

Qualifying for these awards is an arduous task. Of 600 organizations



surveyed by Gallup, The Palace Group was one of only 64 that satisfied Gallup's minimum criteria—far exceeding it—and invited to apply for the Gallup Great Workplace Award by submitting detailed evidence of its culture of performance excellence. A panel of Gallup judges reviews and scores all submissions.

The Palace's 85-page entry application included broad-stroking questions like, "What do you do to engage new employees?" and "What do you do to hold employees accountable to the engagement survey?" plus a phone survey.

Each of the 64 companies also could nominate one manager for Gallup's Manager of the Year award. The Palace places heavy emphasis on employee training and continuing education. As a result, many employees enjoy long tenures at its communities. One such employee is Brenda Anaya, director of housekeeping and laundry—celebrating her 20th anniversary with The Palace Group this month—selected as one of Gallup's 10 finalists.

She'll participate in the Extraordinary Experiences for Exceptional Workplaces event August 1 at Gallup World Headquarters, Washington, DC, with Dubitzky; Helen Shaham, president; and four other Palace representatives—culminating in an awards evening at the Embassy of Singapore celebrating how some of the best companies in the world create extraordinary experiences that connect and enable employees to achieve great performance.



*Brenda Anaya*



*The company's latest project—the 320-unit The Palace at Weston featuring Independent, Assisted Living and Memory Care—broke ground this spring for a projected opening in 2020 next to The Palms at Weston, a luxury active adult condominium community.*

Dubitzky started counting totality of years of experience, average tenure and turnover to see if there's a trend over time, checking numbers daily. At 1,128 employees, The Palace Group is backed by 6,019 years of experience. "That's about 5.5 years of seniority, an average of 10 for managers, with a total turnover rate in the low- to mid-20s [percent]—and that's after Hurricane Irma," he said, "which saw a 5 percent turnover, including 57 'no show' employees who were let go. Our people know our expectations."

Dubitzky's family is highly involved. His brother Zack Shaham is the executive director of The Palace Gardens in Homestead—one of three of the company's assisted living communities all accredited by the international Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), an independent, nonprofit accreditor of health and human services.

Following the Gallup surveys, there was a feedback session with employee teams where "truthful, honest feedback, no BS" was shared.

A financially-incentivized mentor program kicked off last week focusing on the psychological and

emotional aspects of keeping a new employee, rather than the often-typical technical aspects. Mentors are selected based on "the quality of their emotions, their heart." Technical training takes a back seat to keeping employees and having a good atmosphere.

"If you're looking to try to better your operation and you're going to focus on one area of concern—the building, furniture, onboarding, training, whatever—you're going to fail," Dubitzky said. "You have to look at a wide spectrum of things."

"We're talking about people, human beings with emotions and feelings. Watch their body language. Know their strengths. Understand what's going on in their personal life—health issues, family issues. You gotta be flexible. I'd rather give someone a day off to deal with something than spend the next four months trying to replace them. We have Palace Principles and use them every day. My personal favorite, #8—Don't assume. Please ask questions. Don't be shy. Don't be afraid," he concluded.

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