

Leadership and culture change

Effective leadership is fundamental to achieving high quality aged care and, in particular, high quality dementia care.

With good leadership in place, staff feel motivated and are equipped with the resources, supports and skills required to deliver high quality dementia care. Crucially, where leadership is effective, organisations can deliver a culture of care that incorporates a person-centred approach in which the needs and abilities of a person living with dementia are at the forefront of practice.

The aged care sector, with the support of the Australian Government and people who are receiving care, needs to make a concerted effort at an individual provider level and at an industry level to improve the capabilitiesⁱ of leaders in aged care and to drive a culture of best practice across the sector. These capabilities are detailed in the Australian Aged Care Leadership Capability Framework (2014) and relate to the domains of self, others, purpose, business and change.¹

Issue

Strong leadership is fundamental to the delivery of high quality dementia care. The extent to which staff feel appropriately engaged and enabled to perform their work is a key result of good leadershipⁱⁱ. In addition, staff retention, performance and motivation to deliver high quality care are all critically impacted by the abilities of leaders to guide an organisation effectively.

Where leadership is strong, the entire workforce – whether it be the catering team or the CEO – is bound by the common purpose of achieving the best outcomes for their clients or residents. Critically, people with dementia, their families and carers report that effective leadership underpins the delivery of high quality dementia care and impacts their personal wellbeing and quality of life.

¹ The Framework arranges the capabilities into five key domains: Self: the Aged Care leader's understanding of, care for, and overall relationship with her/his self. Others: the Aged Care leader's ability to communicate with, relate to, and work effectively with others. Purpose: the Aged Care leader's ability to articulate and promote the organisation's spirit, purpose and strategic direction in ways that engage and empower employees, clients and stakeholders. Business: the Aged Care leader's management of business resources to achieve organisational goals within a dynamic operating environment. Change: the Aged Care leader's capacity to foster a working environment that supports and encourages creative, holistic approaches to improvement, innovation and transformation in the organisation.

“An aged care facility with good leadership is a place you walk in and it feels organised, calm, teams are working together, staff and residents are relaxed and smiling.” Person living with dementia

The detrimental impact of poor or ineffective leadership is reflected in the concerns expressed by people with dementia, families and carers, and even the sector itself. Evidence suggests that poor leadership can be the result of a range of factors including inadequate levels of skills, education and experience. However, in some instances, it seems that leaders lack the core attributes required in aged care, such as empathy and awareness of the needs of clients – and in particular the needs of vulnerable clients, such as those living with dementia.

Core features of strong and effective aged care leadership include:

- Having competent and capable governance at a board level to ensure that the provider is managed in a professional way.
- Embedding a clear and consistent organisational culture of delivering high quality, person-centred, culturally safe models of care which puts the needs of each individual at the forefront of practice.
- Enabling and motivating staff to deliver a human rights, person-centred approach to care by providing regular supervision and opportunities for ongoing professional development as part of a strong learning culture.
- Proactively building a pipeline of future leaders by supporting and rewarding prospective leaders and talented staff to receive appropriate management and leadership training.
- Embedding strong governance, risk and complaints reporting mechanisms which are adhered to by all staff. The ‘blame culture’ which exists in some facilities needs to be broken down so staff feel supported in reporting incidents and confident to act quickly to resolve issues when they occur.
- Encouraging a culture of openness, where feedback from staff, care recipients their carers and families is used to guide continuous improvement.

Dementia Australia’s position

The aged care sector, with support from the Australian Government and engagement with people who are impacted by dementia, must make a concerted effort to improve the capabilities of leaders in aged care. An improvement agenda for leadership in aged care begins with recruitment - ensuring those selected for leadership positions possess the appropriate skills, competencies, core qualities and motivations of a strong aged care leader.

At a provider level, clear selection processes for CEO, board members and executive teams - which are based upon relevant skills mix, interpersonal qualities and demonstrating a firm understanding of their governance responsibilities - should be applied.

All board members, executive teams and the CEO, should be required to undertake relevant comprehensive dementia education through structured programs, to ensure the approach to their work is firmly grounded in an understanding of dementia.

“In my experience, leaders often lack understanding of what it means to deliver high quality aged care...Leaders need to show empathy and understand what the needs are for people living with dementia” Carer

The Australian Government and the aged care industry should facilitate the development of core education initiatives, delivered at a provider and industry level, to build leadership capability that helps to create strong organisations. Core features of leadership education initiatives should include:

- Implementing ongoing workforce education and capability building opportunities for all staff. Staff education should be considered a critical enabler to the delivery of high quality care. Leadership should be proactive in implementing learning plans for staff and carving clear career pathways to enable staff to specialise in key topics, such as dementia care.
- Embedding best practice models of aged care into day-to-day practice. Leadership must provide a clear vision for driving person-centred and culturally-safe approaches into care.
- Awareness and education on the needs and circumstances of people receiving care. Leaders must set the tone for the attitudes and behaviours of staff by demonstrating empathy and awareness of the complex needs of all clients or residents, including those who may not be able to communicate their wishes as easily and those facing additional barriers as a result of their diverse life experiences or characteristics.
- Implementing effective governance, reporting and complaints mechanisms that incorporate critical feedback from staff at all levels, care recipients, their families and carers and is embedded in the principles of Open Disclosure.
- Recognising that leadership is about how to effectively lead a group of people and is not specifically about clinical leadership.

At a systemic level, to drive improvements to leadership and culture, the Australian Government must embed the principles of quality dementia care into the Aged Care Standards and the aged care industry into the Industry Voluntary Code of Practice. With Aged Care Standards reflecting quality dementia care, leadership should be primed to promote the delivery of person-centred culturally-safe models of care that meet the needs of people living with dementia.

i Australian Aged Care Leadership Capability Framework, ACSA, LASA and Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council, 2014.

ii A Matter of Care, Australia's Aged Care Workforce Strategy, Aged Care Workforce Strategy Taskforce, 2018.