

# Reflections on Leadership



RETIREMENT AND SENIOR  
CARE SERVICES

October 2005

*Celebrating 78 Years of Excellence 1927-2005*  
www.phihomes.org

## *An introduction*

In the Leadership Culture training events of this past summer we began a dialogue on the meaning of leadership within PHI, and the expectations of those in leadership positions within the organization. This publication is designed to continue the dialogue on the concepts of Stewardship, Transparency, Striving for Excellence, and Servant Leadership, and to expand to include other topics that shape the leadership culture of PHI. You are receiving this publication because you are in a position of leadership within PHI, and have special leadership responsibilities. The tone of this publication is intended to be personal. It is an attempt to share what I have found to be important lessons in leadership during my 34 years with PHI, and to reach out to you as a fellow laborer in this vineyard.

While I have the privilege of serving as your CEO today, I began with Presbyterian Homes in 1971 as a nurse in one of our small nursing and assisted living facilities. It was my second job in health care. The first was as an orderly at Mercy Hospital in Port Huron, Michigan. In subsequent years I had the opportunity to serve as a nursing supervisor, Director of Nursing, Administrator, Chief Operating Officer, and lastly, CEO. In each of these roles, I learned valuable lessons that have shaped my outlook on quality care, the meaning of work, and the need for effective leadership.

During that time I have come to know and treasure the PHI staff, a group that makes our mission come to life every day. Based on this experience, I have come to believe that the most crucial

element in this work is the quality of leadership of the organization, especially the leadership that is closest to the services being delivered to the resident. There are two overarching reasons that good leadership is needed in every organization. First, is the need to deliver the highest quality service as efficiently as possible. Good stewardship demands that we use the resources available to us to the best advantage in meeting the needs of the residents we are called to serve. Secondly, and at least as important, is that we owe those who work with us in this ministry our best effort, especially those employees who work in hard jobs on the front line. Good leadership will make their job easier so they can do what they do best.

Contrary to popular opinion, superior performance is rarely, if ever, about how many stars are on a team. It is about how people with different and complimentary skills work together to achieve a common objective. The best thing that can be said about any leader on a team is that he or she made the others on the team better. The goal of this publication is to enable all PHI leaders to build teams of people who are better, stronger, and happier in their work. This is not done by magic, nor is it done quickly. It is also a journey, not a destination.

As we begin this journey, it is with the clear awareness of my own imperfections. Some of my most vivid lessons in leadership have their roots in an experience that I would handle differently if I had the chance to do it over again. I take comfort in two observations about being an imperfect person in an imperfect world. The first is

a slogan that my good friend Jim Emerson has in his office at Presbyterian Homes of Florida. It simply reads "Only new mistakes". The implication is clear. Being imperfect and making mistakes is only a serious problem when we repeat mistakes instead of learning from them.

The second is simply this – "A smart person learns from their own mistakes, A wise person learns from the mistakes of others". Hopefully we can learn from each other's mistakes and increase our wisdom.

Lastly, you will likely find frequent references to faith and values in future issues of this publication. While we are blessed to be working for a church related organization where we can share that part of our lives without apology, this is not a license to turn each observation on leadership into the sermon of the week. I do not fashion myself as a gifted preacher, and that is not what is needed to be a good leader. But being a leader is about values and doing the right thing, even when it is inconvenient or hard. Many of us find a source of strength in a living faith that shapes our thinking in a world where few things seem certain.

Thank you for your effort as a leader and as a part of an outstanding team. Let us continue to learn from each other so that we can become even better in the months and years ahead.

Sincerely,

Stephen Proctor, CEO

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One of my earliest lessons in leadership had to do with the power of perception. As a nurse, my education in the sciences was focused on the collection of facts, and making decisions based on facts. A good deal of time was spent developing my powers of observation and assessment, to separate important findings from extraneous information. I was comfortable with this approach, because it reinforced my natural tendency to look at life in terms of objective reality and truth. As a young person I was pretty confident that all of life was about understanding the facts.

This point of view was challenged in my first experience as an employee of PHI, when I discovered that almost all human problems were shaped more by perception than by objective reality. What was true was important, but what people believed to be true was even more important. This was most clearly evident whenever there was a discussion about making any kind of change.

One striking example was in 1972 when we were contemplating buying new tablecloths for a personal care dining room. This seemed like a pretty simple decision. For more than 40 years, every PHI dining room table had been covered by a linen table cloth. Anyone who has ever had the experience of ironing a linen table cloth knows how difficult and time consuming this can be. In consultation with the dietary and laundry staff, we examined a number of new fabrics that were very attractive, but were easy to iron and maintain. The staff all agreed that the change in the dining experience would be imperceptible. A few weeks later when the change was made, we were astonished at the negative reaction from the residents. When I held a meeting with the residents and family members, I discovered that they did not object to the appearance of

the table cloths, but were convinced that this was just the first of many changes that would mean that we were downgrading the meal service at the facility. They were concerned about the menus, meal times, how the meals would be served, and a host of similar issues. The reality was that we were simply changing the type of table cloth, but we were forced to reassure everyone that there was nothing else going on – no larger plot or scheme to change the quality of the service they were going to receive now, or in the future.

Since that first early lesson, I can't count the number of times I have had to counsel a department head or supervisor who was struggling with a difficult problem, convinced that he or she was right, and that others just did not understand the facts of the situation. Whether the subject was employee discipline, performance reviews, providing positive feedback to a high performing employee, implementing a new policy, or any kind of change involving individuals or groups of people, eventually the discussion returns to how the situation is perceived by other people. One of life's hardest lessons is the realization life is not always about facts and objective reasoning. While there are many facets of how perception and leadership are intertwined, I will confine this reflection to two basic observations. First, almost everything we do as a leader is influenced by what others believe about us. We may have the highest ethical standards, be approachable, a good listener, and care deeply about the residents and the people we work with. But if people have the impression that we are aloof, uncaring, or willing to look the other way when faced with an ethical dilemma, we need to address those concerns if we are to be an effective leader. Sometimes the perceptions of people in leadership are shaped by an experience with another employer or may be based on a lack of

information. Their prior supervisor may have been a dishonest tyrant. Maybe our natural tendency to be quiet may be interpreted as a lack of interest. Most negative perceptions can be cured by open communication – seeking out the opinions of others with a willingness to listen to criticism without reacting defensively - and consistently articulating and living out the values that are important in this ministry. Secondly, the perceptions of the people we work with must be understood and addressed in every situation. This does not mean that we need to be timid in our work as leaders. It does mean that we will take the time to understand the whole environment and anticipate the consequences of our actions. When we understand the perceptions of those we work with, we can deal with their concerns in a constructive way. Awareness is the first step in this process, proactively confronting these perceptions must follow.

As PHI's leadership team, we need to acknowledge that in the work we do, "perception is reality". This is a statement that is both simple and profound. However, just because it is simple does not mean it is easy. It takes a constant effort to detect changes in people's perceptions and to adjust our behavior accordingly. We can all help in this regard, by sharing our observations with each other as fellow leaders and servants in this work. This kind of sharing is only possible when we are personally committed to the success of our fellow leadership team members.

Sincerely,

Steve