

Symposium on Career Resilience in Senior Living Leadership  
Danny and Lenn Prince Endowment Recognition  
Baylor University  
Executive Panel Proceedings  
November 16, 2018

Panelist: Susan Farris, CEO of the James L. West Alzheimer Center; Retired

Interviewer: Mary Ferguson

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Interviewer: The main question that we're looking at is how can the resilience of senior living leadership be nurtured and sustained? So the first question is, why does this topic matter?

Susan Farris (SF): Well, in my mind becoming a competent, confident administrator takes years. We learn the basics, the very basics of the job part of it in school, but it takes a long time to learn how to see the whole picture of the facility, learn how to work with people. It's a very complex art and science actually. When an experienced administrator burns out or leaves the profession, it leaves a big hole to be filled.

Interviewer: What keeps you coming back? What sustains you in the profession?

SF: I've been in the business for 30 years. In the 1980's in Austin, good-paying jobs were kind of hard to come by. So what sustained me early on was just the fact that I could get a good paying job pretty quickly. I mean, quite frankly, that was it. What drove me at that point was just the job security in the job market. It was like that at the very beginning of my career, but after a couple of years I shifted focus and what kept me showing up was that I was learning so much. We had a lot of group meetings at the company I was working for so we were building friendships with each other. And we had really good education every single time we met. I was growing, because I love learning.

Later on in my career, what kept me showing up was, I started to get involved in professional organizations and political stuff, and was beginning to really be listened to professionally. It helped my confidence, kept me interested, and I was proud of my growing network of connections, and the fact that we could work to make meaningful change in the field. It's just like maturing into any position that you have in life, when your voice starts to matter at some point, that's important. So, that was probably 10 years into my career. It's just the whole personal growth thing. That is what kept me showing up because the day to day stuff in the job really takes a toll on you, if you feel powerless to influence change, and like your voice is not heard.

Interviewer: What is the main thing that makes it so hard to stay in the leadership role?

SF: Well, what came to my mind when I read that question was that you feel like, you can never have a bad day. You have to be the support person, you have to be on and positive and supportive and smart and have all the answers for families and residents and the state and your bosses. And it's every day, I mean, it's seven days a week, 24/7. In my case, for thirty years!

There's not a lot of people around to help you out of a jam. But there are a whole lot of people to point out to you when you are in a jam.

I think there are sacrifices of personal life. I remember a lot of times, having the keys in my hand to go home, and I would have called my husband and said, “I'm on my way home”, and then a family member walks in, or a staff member walks in, or the phone rings and you think ahh, but you got to take the call, you've got to answer their questions. And it's another hour before you get home. And you're working so much answering people's needs all during the week, that your real work, like your paperwork and the stuff that you're supposed to be doing during the day, you end up doing nights and weekends. There were a lot of years that I was in positions where I was working seven days a week. So that daily grind, that's what wears away at people.

And then their support system is their bosses. Sometimes, the only support system for an administrator is their supervisors. And a lot of times those supervisors don't think of it in those terms. They beat up on the administrator, and it gets people down. A lot of times the administrators are just in a position of doing what they're told: get on this conference call, go out and get three more residents, cut your food budget by 500 bucks. And when you treat somebody like that, they quit thinking. Administrators are in a position where they need to be free to think and project. There can be a mismatch between the administrator's abilities to lead an organization and doing what they're being asked to do by corporate, which can make you feel like corporate doesn't want you to think. I remember having conversations with people about that, like what you think doesn't matter—you are “the monkey behind the desk”. It just matters that you're meeting the numbers that you're being asked to meet. And that wears you down too, because your customers certainly expect more from you than that.

Now, on the road to competency the hard situations help you grow. You feel pretty good when you come out of it and say, “wow, I did a good job”. It's a rocky road, especially at the beginning where you really don't know what to do. Each successful navigation of a problem helps you grow as an administrator. But there is not usually anyone around to share in that success. It's lonely at the top! That's where the friendships and camaraderie and the having a peer group comes in, and I'm not sure the new generation of kids is going to have that as much as we did. Google isn't going to say “hey, you did a great job navigating that problem. Can you help me with mine?”

Interviewer: What can those around the senior living leader, like owners, supervisors, colleagues, staff, families, residents and the community do to help with making staying in the role more possible?

SF: First, I think its basic, like supporting anyone in any workplace: recognition and *meaningful* feedback. Because it really does go deeper than giving somebody a balloon and saying thank you for your work this year. I think if the owners and managers could do a better job of respecting the administrator's knowledge and assessment skills and having meaningful conversations about the building, it would build Administrator's self-confidence. Questions like--what is the potential for this group of employees, or what does your community support look like, and how can I help you? If corporate supervisors would do a better job of sweeping barriers out of the way of their administrators, and then letting the administrators make decisions, meaningful decisions about

their own property, I think they would find they had better, smarter, and more resilient administrators. And much better longevity!

Second, Directors, whether corporate or non-profit, should think about where their administrators are at in their career and what they might need for support at their level. And then provide incentives that build on that. For instance, if you're early in your career, you're just learning how to do this and it's very draining. So maybe what you need is a week's paid vacation to reconnect with your family, or a few days off with your young children. Maybe that's the most important thing to you. Whereas someone in the middle of their career might say, well I want to learn about the political system so send me to this conference in Washington and pay my way. I think we tend to incentivize administrators with bonus money. Which simply means you're you scrimp and save and underpay your staff and don't buy extra things, and then if you make a little profit at the end of the year, you get some of it back. But what that sometimes feels like is I have underpaid my staff and didn't buy enough linens just so I could get a bonus and this feels pretty rotten. Whereas if someone had said, Hey, Susan, you know, I've noticed that you're really interested in politics, so pick a conference, and I'll send you to that, or I see that you love culture change, and, you're moving your facility towards a culture change model, so what can we do to help you with that? That would have been more of what made me feel good. Rather than just saying, here's your bonus, and then you're looking at your employees--at their kids who don't have shoes, or they don't have a car and you're thinking, oh here I go with my \$10,000. It's embarrassing. I mean, it's not something that I would ever have wanted to share with my employees. Whereas I would have loved to share with my employees that, our company is sending me to this conference, so that I can do a better job helping you guys do X.

I recently retired from a position I held for 14 years. My longest tenure at a facility before that was 5 years. I stayed at the James L West Center because I was allowed to project where to take the organization and I was expected to do it. The Board evaluated me based on where I thought I could take the organization, based on my own assessment and timeline. They were there to help if I needed it, but their focus was on their own roles as community supporters. They left operations up to me. So I made a plan that took 14 years to get to the point that I could say, okay, I've finished my part and someone else can take it from here. I felt tremendous pride at the improvements I was able to accomplish—a complete reconstruction of the Center's living spaces into beautiful “homes”, building a robust community education program, raising millions of dollars, and building a person-centered care program. In the end, what I envisioned and accomplished was far more than what I would have done under a typical corporate structure, and the Center is a much better, stronger entity as a result. And I am so much wiser, smarter and have much greater personal satisfaction in my career than I would have had without that experience. Unfortunately, experiences like that are very rare for Administrators in Texas.

Interviewer: What can Baylor do?

I would like to see Baylor do an annual personal resilience conference for administrators--not based on how you improve your facility, or how you improve your bottom line, but how do you improve yourself as a professional and a leader? You could tap into what point people are at in their careers and perhaps have different tracks to build their resilience. I had different needs at different points in my career. Early on, you need the immediate problem solving and the round table discussions about what you would do in this situation, just to build competence. But then later on, if you've been around 10, 15, 20 years, you want to give back. You want to know how

to be a mentor, or how to be involved politically, how to make your voice heard in the community, and effect change. I have always cared a lot about improving the field of long term care, and improving myself as a professional. But I can't say that I had a lot of encouragement from above, to do those things. I had to seek those opportunities for self-improvement for myself. The education opportunities offered by the Texas trade association conferences were more directed at improvements to facility operations. I was much more likely to find resilience-building topics at national meetings of ACHCA, but it is expensive to go.