In her final column entry, this active-aging professional discusses the challenges of measuring culture change—especially how to recognize the journey’s successful end—and the wisdom of celebrating progress.

by Kelly A. Stranburg, MEd, CEP, CSCS

In this Journal on Active Aging® column, industry veteran Kelly Stranburg shares the process of culture change at the senior living community in which she works. Stranburg relates steps, experiences and insights that illuminate her organization’s journey, which she hopes will help other professionals in older-adult settings who face the challenge—and opportunity—of culture change.

In my last Journal on Active Aging article, we reviewed the value of and potential strategies for communicating the message of culture change. Part of telling your story and communicating your culture-change journey is being able to identify goals, measure progress and celebrate achievements. But how do you even measure something as broad and challenging as the culture change of an organization? How do you know when you’ve reached the end of this journey? That you’ve succeeded? That you’ve achieved what you set out to do?

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Organizations can assess the impact of culture change through metrics such as use of amenities (like the fitness center at Sharon Towers, shown here) or program participation.
‘Are we there yet?’ Measuring progress and success

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When you set off to change your culture, you must understand your organization’s current environment and how your organization envisions the future culture. It’s important to have this conversation as you begin your journey. At Sharon Towers, our life-plan community in Charlotte, North Carolina, we have learned the value of such groundwork to our initiative.

**Short-term wins**

Today, thanks to our efforts to lay a foundation for culture change, we have a vision of what the Sharon Towers community will look like both five and 10 years from now. What people will be doing, how the physical environment will change, what types of amenities will be available. Admittedly, this final destination will evolve as we continue on our journey.

Sharon Towers is creating a strategy to support our culture change, as I depicted in my July/August column (“Creating strategy out of ideas”). Part of that strategy creation involves identifying short-term and long-term goals. Generating both types of goals will help keep us accountable; it will also allow us to celebrate progress when we achieve said goals.

It is critical to celebrate what you accomplish—not only to keep people motivated, but also to show skeptics that progress can be, and is being, made. It is less daunting to measure or track progress along the way for short-term wins than to identify the larger goal of knowing when culture change is fully achieved.

**How will you know you’ve arrived?**

So, how will you recognize when your organization’s culture-change journey comes to a successful end? I encourage you and your team to have this conversation early in your process.

Discuss what metrics in your organization you would like to see impacted by culture change. Is it greater resident or customer satisfaction and/or staff satisfaction? Increased length of stay (if a residential setting)? Reduced falls or chronic conditions? Increased new offerings or programs? Greater or more consistent participation in amenities, events or programs? Or more new customers or longer wait list? All these ideas are black and white, and you will find plenty of tracking mechanisms to support measuring these metrics.

I encourage you, when considering which metrics are best to measure your progress and success, to think “outside the box.” Think about how your culture change may impact the senses. Have the smells changed? Are the sounds different? How does what you observe differ? How do you feel when you walk into your building, center or workspace? I believe that when you focus on culture, some grey areas are impacted that you may not be able to measure or track as easily. But culture includes everything in the environment.

Your culture is your brand. How does it leave you feeling?

Consider asking multiple people to make observations of the current environment and culture, then repeat this process one to two times per year. Are people experiencing and noting changes in addition to the easily measurable metrics that you’ve identified? Their feedback may tell your story to you in a different way—one that depicts whether or not you are on track with your strategic plan for culture change.

At Sharon Towers, we are a long way from identifying whether we have made it or not with our culture-change initiative. We have celebrated the completion or achievement of short-term goals set by the respective subcommittees that support this initiative. We are proud internally and can say, “Check that item off the list.” But, in retrospect, a bigger and more outward celebration would benefit all those involved. Such a celebration would show even more appreciation for the work done by the team members and residents who have

Led by Sharon Towers’ chaplain and spiritual advisor, the ‘Practices in Relaxation and Peace’ program teaches residents meditation and relaxation-based techniques to address sleeplessness, anxiety and depression, and improve overall well-being.
volunteered to participate in this process; it would also help those who are not involved to see and understand our progress better.

**Share the journey**

Sharon Towers will have been buzzing about cultural change for nearly a year when this article goes to print. Yet we have only chipped away at the tip of what is an enormous iceberg. As I’ve written before, changing culture is not for the weak at heart. Nor is aging for that matter! By focusing on cultural change to better support older adults and the aging process, we bring a societal issue to the forefront and tackle it differently for proactive and preventive intentions.

At Sharon Towers, we will continue to pursue the following recommendations, and I encourage you to do the same when considering or working on your culture-change journey:

- **Remember your intention and why you started.** It is easy to become discouraged when a process to create change takes a long time or when there are people who simply think change is not necessary. What can you do when moments like this arise? Regroup, remember the intention, and move forward with a renewed focus.

- **Don’t forget the power of brainstorming and open discussions.** You are in charge. Remember that everyone’s journey is different, and your organization’s journey will be very different from ours. When you hit roadblocks or get stalled, sit back and just talk. Let the ideas flow. Solutions will present themselves.

- **Be transparent and consistent with communication and progress updates.** Share the why of your organization’s culture-change initiative. Share the vision. Share the journey. Don’t be afraid to be vulnerable.

Share the good, the bad and the ugly. It is the best way to learn not only from yourselves, but also from others.

- **Have fun!** I’ve said it before: Enjoy what the culture-change initiative means to your residents or your customers or anyone with whom you work. Make the process and journey fun, so the team—including you—stays engaged and motivated. It’s a long journey! Make it one to remember.

In closing, I must say thank-you to you, the reader. I am grateful you have taken the time over the past year to read and learn from our experiences at Sharon Towers. Spearheading culture change in our community has most certainly presented challenges and opportunities. It is unchartered territory for my colleagues and me.

When we set off on Sharon Towers’ journey, I felt strongly that we needed to share our experience with others, because as we all know, regardless of how we are involved, the aging industry is changing and changing rapidly. I wanted to share the successes and errors in our community’s journey, so those who are considering how to set themselves up for the future could learn from us. I am not saying we are the expert and/or the best. But I hope that through our transparency and openness, you have learned something of benefit to apply to your culture-change journey.

Feel free to borrow our ideas, tweak our ideas, or completely recreate them from scratch. I also encourage you to share your journey. Let’s show society through culture change that the myths and misperceptions of aging are far from the truth, so that we begin to break down the stereotypes and “ageism” that currently exists. I wish you much luck! 🌼

Are you thinking about changing your culture at work? Have you already started?

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**Flowers add vivid splashes of color at Sharon Towers’ monthly farmers market, held May through August. The market is open to residents, team members and the public.**

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**Reference**


**Images courtesy of Sharon Towers**