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“I’ve taken this organisation on a journey.”

Chris How, CEO of The Bethanie Group, is reinvigorating growth and transforming services at the aged-care provider.

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While working as a registered night nurse in Perth in the late 90s, Chris How received a phone call from his father that would alter his life and his career path. “He said that Mum had had a heart attack, and she was being taken to a cardiac care unit in Bunbury, three hours south of Perth,” explains Chris. When he finished work he explained to his manager that he couldn’t do his next night shift. “She told me I couldn’t take time off because she had no-one to replace me. Then and there, I handed in my resignation and walked out the door,” says Chris. “I couldn’t understand how a manager expected staff to care for the customers if they weren’t being cared for themselves. I decided that I had to get into management, because I knew I could make a difference.”

This life lesson is one that has guided Chris throughout his career and now in his role as CEO at The Bethanie Group, Western Australia’s largest not-for-profit aged-care and retirement living provider. “I’m the person who provides support to

staff so they can provide services to our customers,” he says.

Having worked as a part-time care worker at Bethanie when he was only 17, Chris has a deep understanding of the company and of aged care in general. He worked in the private sector and as state commercial manager at the Independent Practitioner Network in 2005, before completing his MBA in Health Care Administration in 2008. Returning to Bethanie as a regional manager, Chris was quickly promoted to general manager and then to CEO in April 2014. With 60 years of experience in customer service and care, The Bethanie Group is located across 24 locations in Perth and regional Western Australia and employs more than 2,000 staff and volunteers. It offers the full continuum of service, from in-home care, serviced apartments and social centres for seniors, to retirement villages, affordable housing and residential aged care.

Bethanie experienced significant growth between 2000 and 2007, but when the global financial crisis hit in 2008, progress ground to a halt. “Only in the past three to five years have I been able to reinvigorate growth »

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and resume our investments in social housing and community services,” explains Chris. Bethanie now has 12 villages and more than 1,000 suites across Perth and Western Australia, with another eight currently in the pipeline. “The aged-care industry has rapidly evolved from a small services industry to one of the largest employers in Australia,” says Chris. “To keep up, many private and not-for-profit organisations like Bethanie are having to transition from a benevolent to a commercial mindset in a highly competitive market, while making sure we don’t lose sight of our mission in the process. And all this must be done with reduced government funding.

“I’ve taken the organisation on a journey where it has transitioned into a commercial entity. I’m a firm believer that a change in vernacular can change the entire culture and perspective of an organisation,” explains Chris. “I started to talk about our residents as ‘customers’ to make it clear that we are a service-delivery organisation – customers are at our core.” The next issue on the agenda was sales – a somewhat taboo topic in the aged-care industry. “Because Bethanie runs three streams of business – home care, social centres and retirement living – we can’t afford not to cross-sell,” says Chris.

Finally, he initiated an action plan to boost profits. “Talking about profit in a

not-for-profit organisation can be challenging, but every business needs to make a profit if it expects to grow. The difference is, our profits go straight back to our people and our business so we can provide quality care for all who need it.”

Bethanie takes pride in its mission-based culture. “We have achieved balance between being a financially stable, commercial organisation as well as a mission-based not-for-profit,” says Chris. “When you come to Bethanie, you’re supported at every stage of the aged-care journey.” Seven years ago, Chris decided to convert the company’s values into behaviours. “You can’t live a value. Turning them into behaviours makes them tangible and achievable,” he says. “Each year, we survey our staff and measure our culture based on six key behaviours to give us a ‘net culture score’ that we can improve on.”

Twice a year, Chris visits every team in every location to discuss their business and culture plans, identifying what improvements can be made. “It takes me around three months of the year, but it’s worth it,” says Chris. “We offer two internal, 12-month leadership courses for employees, aimed at developing specific skills and commercial business acumen. I tell them that if you see a leader who resonates with you, stop, take note of their behaviour, and learn from it. On the other hand, I’ve also had leaders who’ve taught me what not to do.”

Chris predicts that aged care in Australia will undergo a massive transformation when the baby boomer cohort – the 5.5 million people born between 1946 and 1965 – starts thinking about retirement. “The baby boomer wave will hit the aged-care industry over the next five to 10 years, so we are on the verge of rapid expansion. This will benefit not only our industry but our suppliers as well,” explains Chris. “We’re making sure that we are partnering with suppliers that understand aged care and can anticipate the needs of the aged community of the future.” To prepare itself for this demand, Bethanie is concentrating on growth in its home-care business by increasing its service reach throughout Western Australia. “We also have a large pipeline of developments in retirement villages and aged-care facilities,” says Chris. ■



5 TRENDS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF AGED CARE

1. Ageing is being viewed positively
2. Aged care is becoming an end-of-life service
3. Current funding models are restrictive for customers and expensive for government
4. In-home care services are becoming increasingly popular
5. Technology will impact future services

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