



Starbucks Executive Takes On Senior Living!

By Susan Saldibar

I have had this great relationship with Dwayne Clark, the founder and CEO of Aegis Senior Living for several years, and I know him as someone who is singularly focused on being the best CEO with the best organization in the country. I also knew he was friends with Howard Schultz and other C-Suite folks who are crazy successful and focused on team culture.

Because of this, I was not at all surprised when Aegis named in January (2019) Kris Engskov as the new President of Aegis Senior Living, replacing Judy Meleliat who is retiring later this year. It was exactly the kind of move I would expect from Dwayne and Aegis. Prior to joining Aegis, Kris was at Starbucks for 16 years in a number of roles, including president of the U.S. retail business; President of the Europe, Middle East and, Africa division; and, most recently, VP of Business Integration.

I reached out to Dwayne about doing an interview with Kris and ended up with a triple play, interviewing Kris, Dwayne, and Judy in a spirited conversation.



So . . . Just Because It Is Totally Cool

Before doing an interview with this caliber of leaders, I spent a little time doing background research and discovered that one of Kris' very early roles was as an aid to Bill Clinton. Kris was at least partially the role model for the character Charlie Young in the television series, "The West Wing."

Why Kris/Why Starbucks?

My first question was why Kris and why Starbucks? Dwayne response was:

“I think it's more than somebody from Starbucks . . . it wasn't just because of Starbucks that we hired Kris. He had a resume that was very well rounded. His personality and mission bent was a very important part of the decision making process.”

He continued to talk about how Kris has high level experience with the media, public relations, and the press. At Starbucks, he was responsible for 180,000 team members and was in charge of major cultural initiatives.

As the new president, Kris will bring new eyes to an already standout operation and culture and help perfect their operations; explore how to be more innovative; and look at how ancillary services might enhance the resident and team member experience and grow the enterprise.

The Search Process

When Judy made the decision to retire it triggered a bunch of internal discussions. What are the ideal attributes for a new president? What was really important to them? They really wanted someone who would come from a company that was larger than Aegis and someone who had gone through some big growth initiatives.

Aegis also has a history of hiring senior leaders from outside the senior living industry from companies like Amazon, Nordstroms, The Gates Foundation, and Levi Strauss. These are people who have have been extremely successful and were looking for a position that would have a serious mission focus.

As they narrowed in on Kris, Dwayne talked to 24 references and multiple interviews with the Aegis team. Dwayne was obsessively focused on making sure Kris aligned with the Aegis brand and values.



Onboarding Like A Rookie

Aegis has this notion that they want their leaders to be primed for success the Aegis way. New general managers get 100 days of onboard training. Kris is right now in the middle of his new president onboarding, which will take around 3 months to complete. He is just in the earliest working as a care manager in a couple of dozen communities. This will give him tremendous insights that could really not be gained any other way.

This five-month process means that Kris will be able to really understand the business, what it means to be a care manager, a nurse, a food service worker, a salesperson . . . what it is like to give tours to families, to work with them as they make big decisions. It also means that Kris will have time to really get comfortable with the business before he has to make any hard decisions.

Why Is Kris Doing This?

Kris left Starbucks to do this. He did not have to leave, so I was really curious about why he would want to leave this high-profile, “cool” organization to join a company that globally, no one has ever heard of or sees as being particularly cool. Here is why he made this move.

He is intrigued by the industry and sees a lot of growth coming. What we sometimes have a hard time seeing from inside is that there are a lot more people paying attention to senior living, and, more broadly, the business opportunities around serving the needs of seniors. That said, he ultimately joined Aegis and not the industry. What he saw in Aegis was a relatively small, fast growing, entrepreneurial, mission-driven organization.

At the very heart of the decision was that Aegis is an organization that is completely mission-driven. It is all about not getting out of bed in the morning for just a paycheck, but really for that second, and more important, paycheck of improving the lives of people.

Similar to Starbucks, he will really be focused on how they design a personal experience for their residents that makes the most of their life and lifestyle while meeting their physical and mental needs. For team members it will be the same . . . create amazing experiences that will allow them to grow, to see opportunities to be whatever it is they want to be.

Aegis in 5 or 10 Years

My last question was this, “Imagine you are 5 or 10 years down the road, what will Aegis look like?”

“We will be radical.” He went on to say, not in terms of size of the organization, that is not their goal or vision. Rather the goal is to be amazing because of their service, their brand, their innovation -- the unique and innovative way they treat residents and team members. They want to be known, not as a phenomenal senior living organization, but much much bigger as a phenomenal company like Zappos or Nordstroms or Starbucks . . . one that just happens to do senior living.



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