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Christy Van Der Westhuizen

Hi. Welcome to Bridge the Gap podcast. I'm your contributor, host Christy van der Westhuizen. So I'm calling this what I wish I had known when I became a regional Director of sales. Well, lovingly. I'm calling this why the Regional Director of Sales position is one of the hardest roles in senior living. But I'm hopefully going to share some to-dos and not-to-dos of being a Regional Director of Sales in Senior Living.

Again, I'm Christy Van Der Westhuizen, I'm SVP of Sales and Marketing at Jaybird Senior Living, and I've come up through the ranks as starting as a sales director at multiple communities in California, then becoming a regional director of sales and marketing and moving my family to Texas and then coming back to California and becoming a VP of Sales and marketing, and now as an SVP of Sales and marketing.

So this entire journey has been about 18 years of senior living sales. And now I live in Wichita, Kansas. Loving that Midwest life. And I'm excited to share what I've learned over the years as a Regional Director of Sales in Senior Living. So just to set the tone here, I've learned a lot the hard way, and I've learned a lot from people who have done the job extremely well and I've learned from them.

So some people that come to mind are Jeffrey Smith, Carrie Delaney, John Murphy, so many people at Integral Senior Living that I just learned so much from Micki Cianciosi is another one, and they're all still in the industry, which I think is really great. And I love that because none of us have gotten burnt out or disenfranchised with senior living and left the industry.

We are all still here almost 20 years later, and I love that about senior living. And sometimes I'll even tell my husband that even on our worst days, senior living is still something to be extremely proud of. The work that we do does not go unnoticed. Although sometimes, as a regional director of sales, it can feel like that, where we have to be either an enforcer or a bad guy when things are not going well.

But we also get to be the cheerleader and the coach and the mentor when things are going really well. Hopefully, you'll get a little bit of what goes on in my brain when talking about being a regional director of sales. So again, learned a lot the hard way, but also learned a lot from people who have been my regionals when I was a sales director at the community level. So again, I hope you all realize that this is just a little sampling of my experiences. And I in no means am perfect, and I hope that I can be a little honest with you all and focus on that kind of practical honesty and not perfection. So I think what people think a regional director of sales does versus reality can be two very, very different things.

So I think some of the myths that people think that, that regional salespeople are, are that we're all about the numbers, we're all about the spreadsheets, and we're all about quote unquote, fixing communities. So a bit of this is true, but this is absolutely not the entire job. It is certainly

not to look at a spreadsheet and go, oh, I know everything I need to know about the community in order to fix it. There is so much data that goes into being a regional director of sales, or may I even say a very what's the word I'm looking for accomplished regional director of sales. Yes. Part of it is data. And data analysis, but so much of it also is that people focus. The vibe check is what we sometimes call it at Jaybird.

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So I think the myth is that we are looking at spreadsheets and going, oh, now I know exactly what's wrong with the community, so I can come in and fix it, because it truly takes a much more organic and all-encompassing approach than looking at data. So another myth that I think that I certainly thought was when you are at a high performing community, so let's say you're an Ed or you're a sales director at a really high performing community, you may not see your regional as much and your regional visits may be focused on the fun or the appreciation, or let's go to lunch to celebrate high occupancy or high revenue.

So it may look like a lot of fun to be a regional, and it also may look like a lot of flexibility to be a regional, because when you're at a community that is high performing, you may not see your regional as much as a focused community sees their regional director of sales. So that's kind of like what maybe I thought that being a regional would encompass.

So lots of fun, lots of celebration, and I would be able to figure out, put my finger on the pulse of what's wrong through a, an Excel spreadsheet. So the reality is not this. The reality is you're dealing with a lot of people with lots of different backgrounds and also personalities. You're dealing with quite a bit of pressure.

So again, if you are coming from a high-performing community, you may not have seen that pressure that you might now get as a regional director of sales. So you are filled with a lot of pressure to perform or an end to get your teams to perform, and also maybe some competing priorities too. So I kind of think that a regional director of sales is the bridge between strategy and execution.

If you've ever worked with me in a regional capacity, you might know that if the results aren't there, I'm asking, okay, what is our action plan? What are we going to do differently? So I learned a long time ago that one of the best things you can do as a regional or anyone in leadership, really, is when you're explaining something to talk about the what, the so what, and the now, what now. This is definitely something I've learned along the way, so it's not something I made up.

I'm sure there is some attribution there, but it's there. Okay. What is going on? Why is it going on the way it is, and what are we going to do about it? So, always being extremely action-focused is a key role as a regional director of sales. So here are my thoughts on what makes a great Regional Director of Sales.

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So I have a long list, and by no means is this the end all be all list of what makes a great regional. But I think over the years this has really shaped hopefully, the leader that I am becoming. So a great regional is a coach first and a fixer second. And I love this because as a coach, you're invested in your people, now you might have to fix, and there might be a lot of fixing, depending on the communities in your portfolio.

But we are a people-first industry. And so as a regional, being people-first is incredibly critical to your success. So another characteristic is being relentlessly consistent across communities. So here's my suggestion. If you don't have this, then this might be something that you put on your to-do list. But do you have a job expectation document for your sales teams, and do you follow it and do you follow it consistently?

So I don't know about you, but I've had jobs where there were these hidden expectations. So people just assumed that you knew that XYZ was a part of your job description. And so there was a lot of disappointment when XYZ didn't happen. So one of the things that I would really suggest with you is whatever you expect your sales team to do, whatever behaviors of success look like for your organization, write that down and be consistent in following that.

So I certainly have been a part of creating this. It's not just a job description. It is something much more. So, it's what does success look like to the organization in a sales director role? What does it look like daily? What does it look like weekly, monthly, quarterly? But those are things that cannot only set a new salesperson up for success, but can keep the behaviors of success moving forward with your entire sales team.

So again, you're a coach first and a fixer second. And are you relentless about your consistency across communities? And so just along those same lines, is those clear expectations. There's no guessing games when it comes to what does success look like. As when you are hiring and when you are training your team on the ground. So one of these things about clear expectations and no guessing games is I think that a great characteristic of a regional director of sales is to send site visit notes after every visit that you have with the community.

But one thing that I think makes this extremely beneficial is that when you send your site visit notes, you're actually sending them not only to the regional team, but the team that you met with. So I think that this creates total transparency of what you worked on, what are still areas of opportunities, what the action plan is and what the due dates are. So what I've done is when before leaving on from a site visit, I'll actually create the site visit document right in front of the team so we can make sure that we review everything before I leave. And I make sure that I didn't forget anything because I wanted to get their buy-in, and I wanted a culture of transparency, that this was the document that I would be sending to the rest of the team.

There's no email that I'll send after the email that says, maybe something totally different, but I wanted to create a culture of transparency, and that they were absolutely going to be held

accountable to the results that we or the action plan that we all agreed to. Okay, so that's another thing. Another characteristic of a great regional director of sales is being comfortable with tough conversations.

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That is a hard thing to do is to bring up things that are very uncomfortable to talk about. Maybe the results aren't there, but that's what we unfortunately and fortunately get to do as regional directors of sales: be unapologetically focused on our role and responsibility, which, as regional directors of sales, is increasing occupancy and revenue at every community in your portfolio.

So one of my favorite parts of being a regional director of sales is the ability to build trust with your executive directors and sales teams. I absolutely love that and think that in order to get any kind of results, you need to build trust first and foremost. So one thing that I highly recommend is that when you are doing a site visit, that you check in with the executive director, go over the agenda of the day, ask him or her if there's anything else that you want to be addressed during your site visit.

If he or she wants to join you on your site, visit with the sales director and then at the end of the day, before you leave, check out with the Executive Director and go over your site. Visit notes as well as anything that requires follow up and also address anything that came up during the site visit that needs some address from that executive director.

That's what I've seen so much trust and confidence being built is through those one-on-ones before and after a site visit. Another thing that I think makes a great regional director of sales is that they develop other leaders and not dependent people. Okay, so if you've ever heard me speak before, my entire life's mission is to become obsolete in my role now. I hope I'm not talking myself out of a job someday, but my goal is to create a self-motivating, self-propelling, self-correcting sales team.

So I personally never want to be the bottleneck. And I think as a regional director of sales, that should be your goal too, is that you are creating a sales force that can realize a challenge. Come up with the solution, and act upon it without needing to pitch you their idea or without needing to get approval for any action they need to take.

So that's one of the largest things that I can implore anyone who's listening to do is if you are a regional director of sales or want to be a regional director of sales or have another leadership position is that you develop leaders around you, not dependent people who can't make decisions without your approval. Okay, another great characteristic is to be calm when occupancy is loud and very, very visible.

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So this happened when I was VP of Sales and Marketing at MBK Senior Living. And Jeff Fischer was the president of MBK at the time, and this was during the height of Covid. And you all remember what that was like. The results just weren't coming, and the sales just weren't coming. Well, I went into his office, and I was very panicked.

He probably saw the panic in my eyes because the results were just not there, and occupancy goals were just not being met. And he said in his always calm voice, "Focus on the behaviors of success and the results will follow." And that's just what we did. We focused on the things that we knew would create occupancy growth when it was time, and for us, that was database management, which was making sure that every lead that came into our system was it was speed to lead time, as well as having a very personalized approach to every single virtual tour, every single communication that we had.

But we really focused on what does a good salesperson know, dare I say great salesperson? What do they do on a daily basis? Let's focus on that, okay, just a couple more. A great regional celebrates the wins both big and small, because we realized that how you get those high occupancies, how you achieve your high occupancy goals, and your high revenue goals is all these small wins that add up on each other.

So we realized that it takes a giant group effort in order to get the results that we all want. So I think that a great regional celebrates the wins. And this can be through video shout-outs, text shout-outs, Teams chats, shout-outs to the entire company, and personal thank-you notes. But really, the appreciation is a key part of a regional role.

Another way that you can be a great regional is to understand not only your responsibility in sales and marketing, but also understand operations, which includes clinical dining, life enrichment, maintenance, business office as well as finance. So that definitely did not come naturally to me when reading P&L statements. But there have been some great mentors, and I highly recommend that you find a mentor of your own to really dive deep into P&L statements.

Understanding the why behind financials, what good financials are, and to really be knowledgeable about other departments, other than sales and marketing. Okay, so I promised you that I would go over some mistakes I've made and what they've taught me. So this was probably one of my very, very first site visits as a regional director of sales.

And I think I came in guns blazing. I just knew that this community had so much potential, and I thought that the pages and pages and pages of notes that I took, I'm pretty sure I had no less than 20 agenda items that I hit on, with 3 to 4 action items per agenda item. I thought that if I documented everything and had an amazing solution for every problem, that the team would just do it.

And I was very disappointed when I guess if you have 20 agenda items and 3 to 4 action items, that probably 60 to 80 things that oh, I knew would make a difference. And it took a great partner, a regional sales partner that said, whoa, whoa, Christie, this is way too much for one

site visit. This is way too much focus on the 3 to 5 things that you know will get results immediately.

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Then focus on the next 3 to 5 things. That was definitely a good lesson to learn, is I didn't I shouldn't try to do too much at once. So that was big. Waiting too long to address performance issues has been a challenge of mine. So I think one of the kindest things you can do is be clear and to set expectations.

And if the expectations aren't being met, then it's time to refocus and speak about it and document it as well. So that's one thing that that I've learned along the way is waiting too long because it's uncomfortable is not a gift. It actually is the opposite of a gift. It can turn into a tornado down the line. Oh, this is a big one.

I think at the very beginning I really wanted to be liked and loved by all my teams that I supported, and then that didn't really create clarity and accountability. So that took me a while to learn, but I'm glad I did. And then solving people's problems before giving them an opportunity to solve it for themselves. So I typically when someone brings a problem, I like to ask before I jump in and please know I still have to remind myself not to jump in to solve so quickly, but ask what they like to do about it.

And more often than not, their answer or their solution is probably better than yours. And then lastly, I think one hard lesson I've learned is that having sales experience at a community level automatically equals leadership, and not at all. Every community has different needs, there's different people involved, and it requires a very specific action plan and a specific focus that requires getting to know the team.

So I've worked in smooth sailing communities as well as focused challenged communities, and each of these experiences shaped me very differently. So just because you have sales, you've been a sales director at the community level, does not necessarily mean if you get a regional position, you'll know exactly what to do and how to do it. So it is a learning opportunity, and you will still be learning years and years down the line as I have.

I certainly don't think I know it all, and I just think Bridge the Gap for allowing me to share my heart and share what's on my mind of what in the world does a regional director of sales like? What is that responsibility? And at the end of the day, our responsibility is to lead teams and to support teams in meeting occupancy and revenue goals.

And you can do that with a loving heart. You could do that with empathy. But at the end of the day, our focus is not to do the job of sales director for them is support the sales directors' growth and development through your support and your training, and your coaching. Thank you all so much for listening to this Bridged the Gap podcast, and I look forward to speaking with you again soon. Have a great day.

