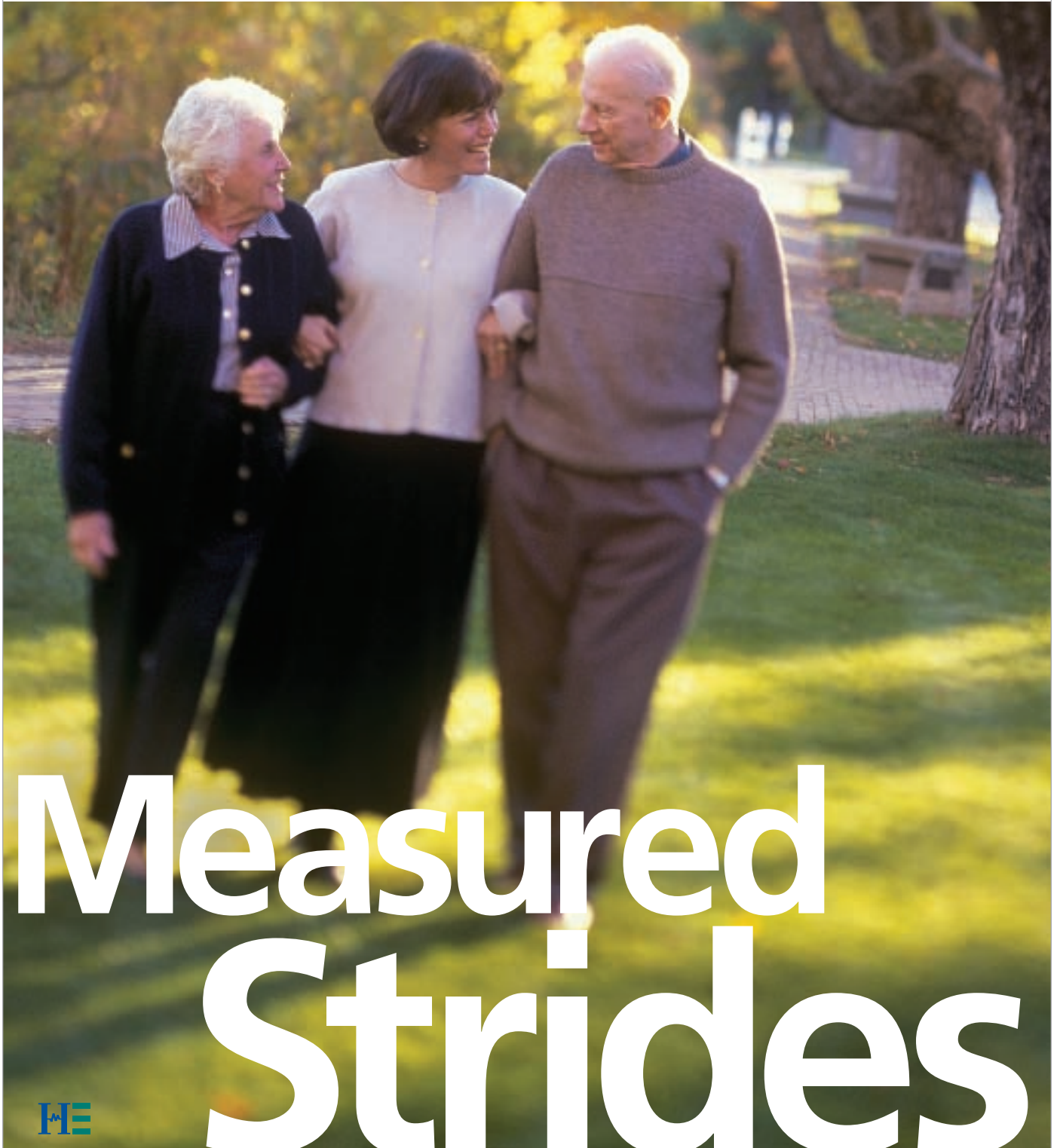




**Andrew Kohlberg talks with Jill Rose  
about growing the right way, hiring the right  
people, and measuring the right things.**

## **Kisco Senior Living**



# Measured Strides



No matter their age, caregivers at Kisco Senior Living LLC communities know what it's like to be 85. Back in 1995, when the company had only five properties (it now has 24), president and founder Andrew Kohlberg hired a full-time director of training. One of her first projects was to implement sensitivity training to help Kisco associates understand what it's like to be in the shoes of an elderly person. The training was so successful it's still in place.

"The associates put on foggy glasses and gloves and have to open prescription medicine bottles," said Kohlberg. "We serve them a bland, all-white lunch they have to eat while wearing the glasses and a nose plug. We try to simulate some of the challenges the elderly face—their eyesight is not as good as it once was, their taste buds have changed, their ability to use their hands isn't as good as it used to be."

Kohlberg said the exercise is part of Carlsbad, Calif.-based Kisco's fierce commitment to customer service that begins with the hiring process and continues through deliberate training, performance measurement, and continuous improvement.

It's that commitment that has allowed \$100 million Kisco to prosper, growing from one property in 1990 to a group of 21 senior living communities and three senior apartment communities, mainly located in North Carolina and California, but also in Florida, Georgia, Virginia, and Nevada. "The senior living industry has a growing customer base, and we're well suited to take advantage of that," said Kohlberg. "We

have a good operating platform, a good management team, and we're doing very well, with high occupancies at almost all of our communities."

### Grow right

Despite the company's enormous growth, Kohlberg said his team remains focused on quality. "Our focus from day one has been responsible growth. We'll only grow at a rate that allows us to maintain the quality of our operations for our residents and consistent profitability for our owners," he said.

As far as Kohlberg is concerned, quality care begins with the hiring process. "We focus on hiring people who fit our culture and have a love of working for seniors. We can teach people how to clean an apartment or deliver a meal—but we can't teach them to have a passion for working with seniors or the patience it takes to work with the type of residents we have," he said.

To determine whether they're a good fit, candidates are given a personality test and are usually interviewed by both a supervisor and a future peer. "They have to have a service mentality where taking care of and pleasing the customer is their primary concern," said Kohlberg. "We also look to see if there's a connection to seniors. Did they have a grandparent they had a close relationship with or an elderly person in their life that got them attracted to working in an environment of serving seniors?"

Hiring is an ongoing challenge for the company, admitted Kohlberg. "We're in a business where turnover is quite high. The industry average is 80% to 100%. Our turnover is 41%, and by





continuing to improve the hiring process, we think we can reduce turnover and have quality associates that fit our culture and our service-oriented mentality,” he said.

Kohlberg believes the other key to retention is well-trained supervisors, citing research that shows people leave a supervisor more often than a company. “Even if it’s a good company, if someone’s direct supervisor doesn’t care about them and manage fairly, they’re likely to have lower satisfaction and leave the organization. Having well trained supervisors is the key to having a great work environment,” he said.

To that end, supervisors are given the tools they need, including an electronic hiring and performance appraisal system. “A manager can take a position, define the competencies that are important for that job, and the program will give them questions they can ask the candidate to see if he or she has skills in those areas,” Kohlberg explained.

Together with online appraisals, it’s a powerful system. “You customize the interview process based on the job description, hire for that, train for that, and base your performance management program on those same competencies,” said Kohlberg.

### **Measure right**

As the company expands even further, this time with a 40-acre continuing care retirement community (CCRC) in Oahu, it remains committed to its program of continuous improvement using the standards created by the Malcolm Baldrige program.

“We chose Baldrige because it is a framework to run an organization, rather than a way to improve a particular process,” said Kohlberg. “We try to make these standards a part of what associates do every day. If I hear someone say they don’t have time to use the Baldrige criteria, that’s a signal they don’t understand what it means.”

Kohlberg is understandably excited about the Hawaii project, the company’s first to include skilled nursing. With land and construction prices skyrocketing, it’s more difficult to build profitable rental communities, he said. “CCRCs are buy-in projects; you don’t start construction until you’ve pre-sold 70% of the units. It reduces the financial risk somewhat—you know you have a viable project before you start construction.”

Kohlberg believes the company is well suited to expand into large-campus communities and that Kisco’s Healthy Strides wellness program will be an important differentiator. “Healthy Strides is a comprehensive approach to wellness, rather than just a physical fitness program,” he said. “We encourage our associates to participate in the wellness programs along with residents, and about 39% of them do so.”

Healthy Strides takes a holistic approach to wellness, encouraging people to participate in life-long learning, vocational, spiritual, social, and intellectual activities, Kohlberg said. “Rather than the bingo-type of activities many communities are limited to, all of our outings and programs are designed to enhance one’s lifestyle. It’s an all-encompassing approach, incorporating the whole philosophy of the company.”

