

# Strengthening the Leadership Pipeline in Aging Services

The future of the industry will depend on the leaders we develop today.

## Thought Leadership

As demand for senior living, home health, and hospice care grows, the aging services industry faces a pivotal inflection point. In the coming decades, millions more older adults will depend on these systems—not only for care, but for community, dignity, and purpose. Yet as the need expands, leadership pipelines are shrinking, and the internal pathways that once nurtured future executives are straining.

Meeting this challenge calls for deliberate and urgent investment in leadership development. Building a resilient pipeline means visionary leaders who can navigate complexity, earn trust, and uphold the deeply human values at the heart of this work. As leadership grows stronger, culture becomes stable, teams feel better supported, and the experience for families remains sustainable over time.

## FROM INTERNAL GROWTH TO EXTERNAL SEARCH: A SHIFT WITH CONSEQUENCES

Aging services once cultivated leaders through long-term investment. Dining staff became directors. Nurses advanced to executive roles. Long tenures were common, and internal promotions were values-driven—a way to support culture, deepen trust, and reward commitment.

Many leaders describe their growth as a process of learning through proximity, absorbing the rhythms of a community over time, then carrying them forward.

But that model is facing. A new Korn Ferry survey found that only a small share of aging services leaders is confident in their successors. Nearly half described their leadership pipeline as “weak” or underdeveloped. Even seasoned CEOs admitted their organizations lacked a clear, proactive succession strategy. One CHRO told Korn Ferry that their senior living organization faced “critical retirements,” only to realize there was “no one truly ready” to step in.

The issue is larger than headcount. When transitions happen without prepared successors, organizations spend precious time searching externally as internal operations face mounting strain.

## WHY THE PIPELINE IS BREAKING

The past several years have reshaped aging services and the fabric of care itself. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted delivery, leaving leaders to manage ongoing crises while maintaining morale and continuity. Today, external pressures—rising acuity, persistent workforce shortages, tight margins, and more discerning consumers—are



converging with internal realities. Many senior leaders built their careers in a more stable era, marked by slower transitions, linear growth, and time to develop. Now, those same leaders are navigating complex change while nearing retirement, often without a strong bench to support smooth succession.

“It used to be a decade-long journey from department head to COO,” one CEO of an assisted living organization told Korn Ferry. “Now, we’re trying to compress that into two years—and it’s not working.”

A prolonged talent recession has only intensified this issue, with its effects likely to linger for years to come. And the widening gap between current leadership and future needs makes intentional development even more necessary for the sector’s survival and growth.

## THE HIDDEN RISK: LOSING CULTURE IN TRANSITION

Leadership transitions in aging services are cultural moments as much as operational ones. When rushed, organizations risk not only effectiveness but also their very identity. One Chief Strategy & Human Resource Officer of a hospitality and senior living management firm told Korn Ferry that the real challenge goes beyond filling a role. “It’s preserving the culture,” the executive explained. “We’ve had folks here for decades. They carry our values in how they lead. If we move too fast, we lose that.”

Culture can fray under successors who haven’t absorbed the community’s ethos, been mentored by outgoing leaders, or been grounded in the daily realities of care. Several executives emphasized how operational exposure underpins credibility and connection. “You need a deep sense of place,” said one Chief Corporate Affairs Officer at a senior living provider. “Without that, it’s hard to lead in a way that resonates with staff and residents.”

## THE LEADERSHIP WE NEED

Today’s leaders need to be defined less by tenure and more by adaptability, judgment, and relational intelligence. That means that the sector must rethink how it identifies and develops potential.

In our survey, C-suite executives ranked leadership development as a top priority, yet many admitted their systems for assessing potential and planning succession remain informal. Our research shows that tenure alone no longer signals readiness. Organizations need to build capabilities such as learning agility, inclusive leadership, digital fluency, financial acumen, and relationship management—skills that enable leaders to influence across clinicians, boards, and families.

Executives also told Korn Ferry that emerging leaders will need to be adept at navigating evolving technologies, skilled in creating psychological safety across generations, and resilient enough to support themselves and others through periods of transformation. These aren’t abstract ideals but the practical muscles that keep a community steady when conditions are anything but.

Yet, the people who most need development are often the least likely to receive it. While most organizations offer leadership programs, few believe those programs are effective—and even fewer include frontline staff. That last point is the quiet fault line.

Certified Nurse Assistants (CNAs), dietary aides, and hospitality staff—those who interact most with residents—are often excluded from development pathways. “We promote people without training them to lead,” one CEO of a senior living and care organization told Korn Ferry.

When high-potential employees don’t see a future, they create their own exit plan. And when development is reserved for those already at the table, organizations become top-heavy, with too few rising from within.

## A TIME-SENSITIVE OPPORTUNITY

There's still time to rebuild leadership pipelines in aging services, but that window is narrowing. The sector is changing—workforce demographics, consumer expectations, care delivery models, and the financial structures behind all three. Leadership development can't remain a background process. It needs to be prioritized by boards, resourced by executive teams, and shared by operators, HR, and clinical leaders.

That shift starts with a more inspiring purpose. In many ways, leadership development serves a promise to staff and families: the values that drew them to aging services will endure, because the next generation is being prepared to carry them forward.

In interviews, several executives shared new strategies to develop future leaders. Some are testing rotational assignments that expose emerging talent to departments like financial, clinical operations, and sales. Others are forming cohorts where first-time managers learn important people skills—such as coaching, feedback, and managing schedules—while supported by experienced preceptors on the floor. A few organizations are also introducing “bridge roles” for frontline staff, including med-tech pathways and team-lead assignments that come with coaching and a raise, not just a new badge.

Yet, while 64% of organizations we surveyed say they offer leadership development programs, only 31% consider them effective. And just 8% report that they include frontline staff. This gap shows how uncommon it is for such initiatives to reach beyond management—and why leaders view them as necessary for strengthening the talent pipeline.

The common thread is proximity. Development works best when it's embedded in the work, not outside it—and when learning is connected clearly to advancement and pay.

For leaders looking to start, a 90-day sprint can build momentum without overwhelming the system. Begin with these five steps:

1. Identify two or three critical roles where succession risk is high, such as unit manager, administrator-in-training, or director of nursing.
2. Run a simple assessment to spot strengths and gaps in promising internal candidates.
3. Give those candidates targeted exposure by having them lead a census recovery huddle, own a family-experience project, and co-pilot a staffing redesign—all paired with a weekly mentor meeting.
4. Protect four hours a month for cohort learning focused on essentials—leading through ambiguity, building inclusive teams, communicating with families and boards, and using electronic health records or scheduling data to guide decisions.
5. Track three indicators consistently: internal fill rate for key roles, time-to-readiness for your candidates, and early-tenure turnover for first-time managers. Review, adjust, repeat.

The goal isn't to launch a perfect academy. It's to make development visible, practical, and tied to outcomes that matter.

The aging services sector doesn't need leaders who maintain the status quo. It needs leaders who can evolve it without losing its meaning. “This industry was built on mission and heart. But it can't survive on sentiment alone,” one President and CEO of a senior living and aging services provider told Korn Ferry. “We need to modernize how we grow our people, or we risk losing both our talent and our soul.”

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– President and CEO, senior living and aging services provider

## CLOSING STAKES

The aging services industry is one of the most consequential leadership environments in the country. The work happens in *real* time, under *real* pressure, in the lives of *real* people. That's exactly why leadership development can't wait for calmer conditions.

Boards and executives need to decide whether they will treat development as a strategic utility and rebuild the pipeline from within or keep betting on last-minute searches and hope the culture holds. One path gives organizations continuity and conviction. The other leaves them reacting. This is the moment to act.

The leaders developed today will shape the future of aging services. This is the chance for organizations to look beyond the daily pressures and recognize the extraordinary potential already in their teams. The people who will carry this work forward are already here. They're waiting to be seen, supported, and trusted.

When you invest boldly in their growth and light the path ahead, you will leave this field stronger, more resilient, and more human than before.

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