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Meet the seniors' housing CEO who makes beds and scrubs toilets

'You don't see unless you're actually doing the job,' Raymond Swonek says

[Madeleine Cummings](#) · CBC News ·

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No job too small for this CEO

3 years ago | 1:13

For GEF Senior Housing's CEO, Raymond Swonek, taking a turn at his employees' jobs helps him understand his organization. 1:13

No job is beneath Raymond Swonek.

Since he became CEO of GEF Seniors Housing 13 years ago, he has dedicated time every year to working side-by-side with staff in all 10 of the organization's seniors' lodges and some of its apartment buildings.

On Tuesday, Swonek arrived at McQueen Place in west Edmonton with his own rubber gloves and hairnet, ready to take orders from staff.

They had him bowling with residents, chopping cucumbers for the evening salad bar and vacuuming a couple's suite.



Raymond Swonek, CEO of GEF Seniors Housing, vacuums a suite in McQueen Place. (John Shypitka/CBC)

This was far from his first trip to the lodge. He recalled one resident's 100th birthday party and addressed staff members by name. He quickly identified two new staff members in the kitchen and asked their names and if they were enjoying their jobs so far.

Swonek has a remarkable ability for remembering names, multiple staff members told CBC News. And not just names. He remembers details about employees' families and personal lives, successes and setbacks.

On Tuesday, he asked Tracy Grover, manager at McQueen Place, about a foot injury she sustained weeks ago.

Staff appreciate and look forward to his visits, Grover said.

"I think they take away that he cares about them."



GEF Seniors Housing CEO Raymond Swonek slices cucumbers for an evening salad bar at McQueen Place. (John Shypitka/CBC)

Swonek, who is 56 and trained as a chartered accountant, started at GEF Seniors Housing in 1997 as its chief financial officer. He left Edmonton to work abroad in the early 2000s but returned in 2005 to lead the non-profit housing organization.

He can't remember what inspired him to carve out time for regular lodge visits, but he recalled wanting to know what was going on in the organization's buildings.

"It really gives me a nice opportunity to interact with staff, see what they say, see if there's anything we need to change to make things better for them," Swonek said.

Spending a full day with employees — not just an hour or two — and sharing their workload allows him to see the organization from different perspectives, he said.

"You don't see unless you're actually doing the job."



Tracy Grover said staff look forward to visits from CEO Raymond Swonek every year. (John Shypitka/CBC)

Visits with housekeeping teams, for example, led him to streamline the organization's entire cleaning processes because he noticed each lodge was cleaning differently, using different kinds of chemicals and equipment.

Staff particularly enjoy watching their boss, who stands six feet three inches tall, crouch down to clean toilets.

"We get a kick out of it," said Kim Emmelkamp, a casual employee working as a housekeeper on Tuesday.

"It always looks easier from the other side, but when you're physically cleaning the bathrooms, it's a very physical, hard, demanding job," Swonek said. He prefers helping out in the kitchen and chatting with residents in the dining room.

There he finds the main reason he loves his job.

"We're making a difference in the lives of seniors," he said. "You actually see something at the end of the day that's rewarding to you."

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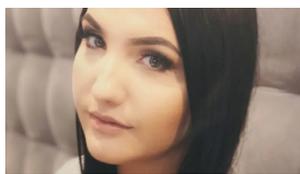
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