

The Time for Strong Leadership is Now!



John Moore
Chairman of the Board and CEO
Atria Senior Living

John Moore is the Chairman and CEO of Atria Senior Living, Inc., which has achieved a nearly 100% COVID-19 vaccination rate among its U.S. employees.

Here are key take-aways from his conversation with Ken Banta about that experience:

1. Sometimes it is necessary for leaders to thoughtfully decide for the greater good of a group of people.
2. People respond to leadership. When direction comes “from the top”, it makes a difference.
3. Internal campaigns showing a range of peer employees being vaccinated can activate peer-to-peer engagement.
4. Many young people have never experienced a vaccine that “saved the world” and may need to be provided more information about the value of being vaccinated.
5. High vaccination rates can become a source of pride for the entire organization.

You encountered a unique challenge with many residents and staff in different areas of the U.S. What steps did you take to implement vaccination efforts?

We knew early on that we would mandate the vaccine. We made the decision at the end of 2020 and announced our mandate on January 11, even though nobody else was doing so at the time.

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Even as we prepared for our first clinic on December 21, we could not find anyone else mandating the vaccine. Other senior housing communities did, eventually, but not until much later.

We saw the mandate as a natural extension of other things we were doing to protect residents and employees, like procuring protective gear and an unrivalled COVID-19 testing program. We also knew that some of our employees commuted via mass transit or lived in underserved communities and with multigenerational families. Vaccinations would protect them, their families and their communities.

We felt that our early access to the vaccine obligated us to take full advantage of its availability. We knew that for every person vaccinated, a link in the possible chain of transmission is broken and vaccinated individuals can say “...the disease stops with me.”



That seems a bold move, certainly then and even today.

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Our residents deserve to live in a vaccinated environment. Our staff deserves to work in a vaccinated environment. That helped us make the decision to do it and that's how we communicated it internally.

Here's the reality: no one wants to take a vaccine. We saw that happen in the past with flu. If you don't have to get a vaccine, why would you? But people respond to leadership. We are committed to that. We believe in that. We learned that leadership sometimes requires making the right decision for the greater good of a group of people. The vast majority of our staff appreciate that we were willing to take that step.

The peer-to-peer aspect sounds crucial. You could lead from the top, but it appears peers at every level played a role. Is that that the correct takeaway?

Yes, it is. We created call-to-action videos of our staff getting the vaccine. We showed a wide range of people, so everyone could see themselves in those getting vaccinated. We made sure there was diversity, with people who shared their race, gender, department or level in the company. We figured that would resonate.

We cultivated a sense of excitement, celebration and pride about getting the vaccine. That resulted in everyone taking pride in our company. That helped us talk about it as a decision we made collectively.

We called our campaign *Sleeve Up*. There's even a photo of me striking the Rosie the Riveter pose when I got the vaccine. Sleeve up, t-shirt and all.

The more people are vaccinated, the quicker we're done with COVID. I'm so proud of how our staff stepped up and *Sleeved Up*. The results tell us that it was a good decision to make up our minds early and to take the steps we did.

Did you encounter resistance about the vaccine?

We knew there could be concerns and resistance about the vaccine among some groups, but that turned out not to be the case for us. In our case, the divide between people was not ethnic, political or religious. It was age. In many cases, it was the younger people who objected.

Younger people don't have the historic vaccine experience. They haven't seen a vaccine save the world. They don't have vaccine "muscle memory." Older people remember smallpox and polio and the people affected. Vaccines solved those problems for younger people. They don't have this memory and so they need more information than older people about the importance of vaccination.

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Did you mandate the vaccination for residents or provide the option?

There was no need to mandate the vaccine for residents. They had “muscle memory” going for them. When we showed up with a syringe, residents rolled up their sleeves and said, “You know what, give it to me.” They saw smallpox and polio come to an end. As a group they understand the importance of vaccines.

Isn't vaccination a public health leadership responsibility?

It is, but it's one that can be shared with business leaders. Government can issue mandates, but from a business point of view, it's the right thing to do to help.

It's not only the right thing to do, it's the right thing for business. Here's our story: our business is recovering much faster than those we're competing against. There are lots of good senior community options available today and people consider several options before they decide. We can say we're 100% vaccinated and that makes us the preferred choice these days. It also helps us recruit staff.

Our high vaccination levels, along with continuing easing state restrictions, enable us to expand our Engage Life® programs, larger group dining, the use of community amenities and increased family visits. Statistically speaking, COVID-19 doesn't exist anymore in our communities. We couldn't have gotten this far without our employees and residents embracing the vaccine.

What would you say to another CEO who doesn't have your healthcare knowledge? What concrete recommendations would you offer?

Get a team working on communications and keep the momentum going. Start with a simple, straightforward message that the leadership of this business believes that we all deserve to work in a vaccinated environment. Just a clean, simple message. There's no agenda other than that. That's enough of a message.

After that, build momentum with a campaign to promote the vaccine among all types of employees, like we did. As new information emerges, add that to the campaign. Make it fun. Get creative with short videos. Bust the myths.

Consider on-site vaccination clinics like we had. In fact, have multiple clinics. In our case, that allowed people to see what their peers experienced, learn from that and then have time to consider the vaccine for themselves. Even people who are hesitant at the start can come to accept vaccination as they listen to others, learn the facts and have time to think about it. An on-site clinic is also a great help if being away from work to be vaccinated creates a barrier for employees.

Finally, remember that we'll get a chance in the fall to do another big push and, this time, we can include flu vaccine, which is also recommended for all adults. It's our chance to say: “let's keep working at this.” Our partnership with chain drug stores was good for us and there may be one in their area able to help out.

Pardon the pun, but any parting shots to offer business leaders?

Just one, and it's this: As a leader, you can take a stand on lots of different issues. Why not this one?

John Moore

John Moore is the Chairman and CEO of Atria Senior Living, Inc. He has served on the Board of Atria and its predecessor's boards since 1999 and was elected Chairman in 2012. He has a long history in managing real estate investment funds and operations, including as Chair of the Board of the National Investment Center for Senior Housing and Care. He is also a member of the Argentum Board of Directors.

Atria Senior Living

Atria Senior Living is a leading operator of independent living, assisted living, supportive living, and memory care communities in more than 200 locations in 28 states and seven Canadian provinces. Atria serves more than 20,000 older adults and employs more than 12,000 people. employees. We create vibrant communities where older adults can thrive and participate, know that their contributions are valued, and enjoy access to opportunities and support that help them keep making a positive difference in our world.

For more information about Atria, visit AtriaSeniorLiving.com or follow them on Facebook or Twitter

Atria and Vaccine Confidence

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