**Brooke Thornbrugh:**

Welcome to our @ Home podcast today we have Christy Merritt here to talk about what it means to be a leader in the long-term care world. Christy, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your work in the aging community?

**Christy Merritt:**

Sure, I have been in senior living for close to 10 years now. I'm no stranger to leadership roles, I've been in those, pains me to say, 20 years plus. I have led teams in a couple of different states in Nebraska, and now most recently in Arizona, have worked for privately held companies as well as now a publicly-traded company. So, it started out as an executive director and became a director over multiple communities. So multisite leading, and now I'm a district director for 14 communities in Arizona.

**Brooke Thornbrugh:**

Amazing, thank you for being here today. My first question to you is what has been your experience with being in a leadership role?

**Christy Merritt:**

Oh, gosh, leadership. For some people, I think it comes naturally to me. I think it's funny, I tell people, I think people followed me in the beginning because I always had that knowledge and a knowledge base, I caught on to things quickly. And so, people were like, this person knows what's going on. So, let's go this way. You know, and as I progressed, my leadership role has been less about me and more about the people whom I lead. I was Vice President, for a company based out of Chicago. And I think that was kind of a pivotal moment in leadership for me, in which somebody really showed me the difference between leadership and management, and there is a huge difference. And ever since then, it's been I've led teams of 20, 40, 70, 100 plus people. It's been a pretty, pretty roller coaster ride, but I've definitely enjoyed it.

**Brooke Thornbrugh:**

Yeah, we've been talking about leadership and what your experience has been, but what is your leadership style? And how has that style changed throughout the pandemic?

**Christy Merritt:**

I think it's important to understand, you know, you see yourself as a leader, like I alluded to earlier in my question, because people follow you for information because you're the one with the map to the place, they need to see it. And throughout the years in my leadership journey, I've learned to get people to follow me because they want to, not because they have to. And I look at leadership, from a bottom-up standpoint, it's more of a supporting role than a top-down role. My father was a Navy Commander. And so, my first experience and exposure to leadership was to do it because I say so. And then I've learned if you really want people to follow you, you have to employ and empower the right people to get the job done. And then you have to be the supporting role, not the top-down role, let them be the ones who drive the business, but give them the tools that they need to do the job. Throughout the pandemic it was truly about there was some panic mode, like survival mode. So, people had to do what you said because they had to do what you said. But that only lasts so long, right? And so, then you have to understand that we all are armed with the same amount of information we interpreted differently. And so how can I support you to run into move forward the way that you best feel that you can? So how could I equip those people? Because at the end of the day, my leaders had to look themselves in the mirror every morning, and say that they made those decisions, and know that they had my support.

**Brooke Thornbrugh**:

Yeah. What about when it comes to holding people accountable? When you need to hold people accountable water effective strategies, what is needed in order to give constructive feedback?

**Christy Merritt:**

I think the first and most critical piece if you want to be a credible leader, to be able to hold people accountable, is you have to have their interests at heart. If you have their best interests at heart, then you can hold people accountable. If you are one of those. And we've all known, you know people who are like I'm the leader, I'm the manager to do this. And I said that you should do this. And if you don't do this, this is what's going to happen. It's my mom used to always say no, it's not what you say it's how you say it. Accountability needs to be your friend. You need to see it as a tool to help people get better or to change your behavior. Now there are people that just inherently are in the wrong position. I like to believe the best in most people. So, I truly don't believe that people get up and go to work to fail, or they don't get up and go to work and say to make you mad, they just get up some days and they're in the wrong spot. And so, they're fighting, they're grinding to do the thing that they just aren't capable of. So, tools of accountability are you make your expectations clear, this is what I need from you. And then you continually communicate throughout the process. If you're not getting what you need from someone, you look at the why. I always tell my teams, why did happen? And how do we fix it? And I approach, you know, my individual leaders that way too, like, why aren't they succeeding? Is it because they don't have the skillset? Is it because they don't have the desire? Or is it because they don't have the support, you know, in your approach those each a different way. But at the end of the day, it's the same goal. This is what I need you to do, you don't need it, here's what we're going to do. And it doesn't have to be negative, you know, nobody's going to love you, if you tell them that they're in the wrong position. But hopefully, years down the road, they will appreciate that. So just, you know, clearly defining those goals, clearly defining what the outcomes will be, and then staying true to those.

**Brooke Thornbrugh:**

What strategies have you used to mentor others as leaders?

**Christy Merritt:**

Again, I think the most important thing is I'm putting everyone else first, you know, I had a leader when one of the best leaders I've ever had the privilege of supporting, and he was in a role that was probably three steps beneath him, and I saw it, but the funny thing was, he didn't see it. And helping him believe in himself, understand his capacity to lead others, feeding them, you know, it's kind of like that. There's a saying called Feed the Beast, you know, when you've got someone who's really excellent at something, you just feed that and letting them outgrow you and your company in your current role because if it's not all about you, and it becomes about them, you will mentor and lead people who will go above and beyond probably the current role that they're in, it truly even may be the company that you both work for at the same time. You know, the other component is, is just understanding their why. why do they do what they do, what motivates them, what drives them, and then continue to be empathetic to their needs. And understanding that in the workplace, that is not the beginning and ending of anyone, you know, everybody wants to get better, everybody wants to do a good job. And, you know, I think leadership is influence a lot of people attribute leadership to title like you have to be an executive this or vice president, that leadership, I think it was John Maxwell said that leadership is simply influence. If you have the ability to influence others, you are a leader. And so understanding that and not seeing, you know, not making this divide between frontline staff and, and director roles, like truly seeing everyone in your building is having influence and then mentoring them, you know, in ways that are that are different and exclusive to them and their style and needs.

**Brooke Thornbrugh:**

Yeah, what guidance would you give to new leaders in this field?

**Christy Merritt:**

Anyone who's working in this field right now, today- patience, patience, and perspective. Never forget what you do. And why you do it. We do it because you know, most of us either love to lead and watch people grow. Or we have a tremendous passion for seniors. And it's easy today to get caught up in all the minutia. I mean, we have staffing shortages, we have more regulations to follow than we ever did. And everyone seems to have the right answer, but no one seems to have the same right answer. And so, you feel like you're flying blind. And quite truthfully, people in leadership roles and senior living right now are exhausted, we are exhausted, because there was this promise that it was going to end, we were going to get back to day to day, and we didn't. So, you have to be patient. And you have to remember that not only are we not getting back to the way that things were, but neither are the people who we are caring for. And neither are teams, who now we're navigating, you know, our frontline staff in some of our leaders, you know, they're trying to navigate through their day-to-day job there. They've got kids who have to be out for 14 days and you're no longer, you're no longer getting paid for COVID Leave. And so, you're 14 days without income. And there are just so many challenges that at the crux of it, you have to remember your why. So, every day get up and tell yourself, your job is to go in into care for the people who have you know, come to you and entrusted you in their care, and remember what brings you joy, and that will get you through.

**Brooke Thornbrugh:**

Thank you. That's all the questions that I have for you today thanks for being here and being on our podcast.

**Christy Merritt:**

Thanks so much for having me I very much enjoyed it.