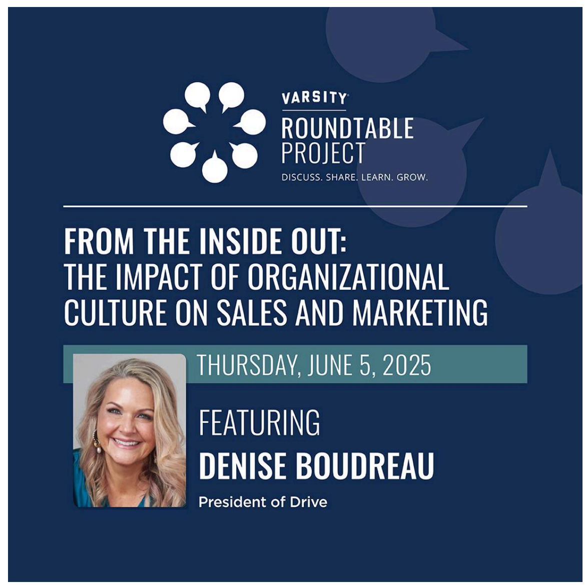
SALES AND MARKETING ROUNDTABLE #260
The impact of culture on sales and marketing with Denise Boudreau

Thank you to everyone who attended our 260th Sales and Marketing Roundtable!

NOTE: To provide anonymity during the Roundtable discussion, participants and their communities will not be identified.



ABOUT OUR GUEST

On this week's Roundtable, we were joined by Denise Boudreau, President of Drive and a nationally recognized expert on organizational culture in senior living.

Denise explored how culture isn't just an HR topic, it's a critical driver of trust, occupancy, and team performance. She shared practical ways to strengthen internal culture and turn it into your community's greatest sales and marketing asset.

"Culture drives every single outcome in an organization and even the financials. And yet people sort of guess at culture."

(Denise Boudreau)

FRESH PERSPECTIVES

- **CULTURE ISN'T FLUFF, IT'S THE FOUNDATION -** Culture isn't a gut feeling. It's "how things work around here"—and it drives everything from engagement to occupancy. Treat it like data, not vibes.
- **ENGAGEMENT FOLLOWS CULTURE, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND -** Don't confuse culture with employee engagement. Culture shapes how people feel about work. Fix the system, and the feelings follow.
- **LEADERSHIP CAN'T GUESS CULTURE -** Leaders often have a rosier view than frontline teams. The only way to bridge that gap? Ask people directly and listen.
- **VALUES AREN'T WALL DECOR—THEY'RE A ROADMAP -** Organizations that align culture with employee-selected values (like accountability or teamwork) see real results, including better retention, better performance.
- **BETTER CULTURE, BETTER OCCUPANCY -** It's not a theory, it's backed by data. Communities with strong culture score higher in occupancy, with fewer costs and less turnover.
- **INTENTIONALITY WINS OVER INSTINCT -** Saying "we've got a great culture" isn't enough. The best organizations build culture on purpose, not by accident.
- **KNOW YOUR PERSONAL DRIVERS -** A quick 5-minute Personal Values Assessment can reveal what's fueling you personally or what's missing. Living your values at work matters more than ever.

LINKS & CONTACT INFO

Denise Boudreau (Linkedin)
Drive (website)
Article - "The Impact of Culture on Senior Communities" (here)

COMING UP ON VARSITY'S ROUNDTABLE!

Please join our next Roundtable gathering on Thursday, June 12 at 12 p.m. ET, 11 a.m. CT and 9 a.m. PT. We will be joined by Barbara Sullivan, National Director of the Village to Village Network.

THE NEWEST EPISODE OF VARSITY'S PODCAST

Varsity's podcast, Roundtable Talk, is about longevity and aging. Each episode features a discussion with an industry expert about how to solve the many mature market challenges facing brands today.

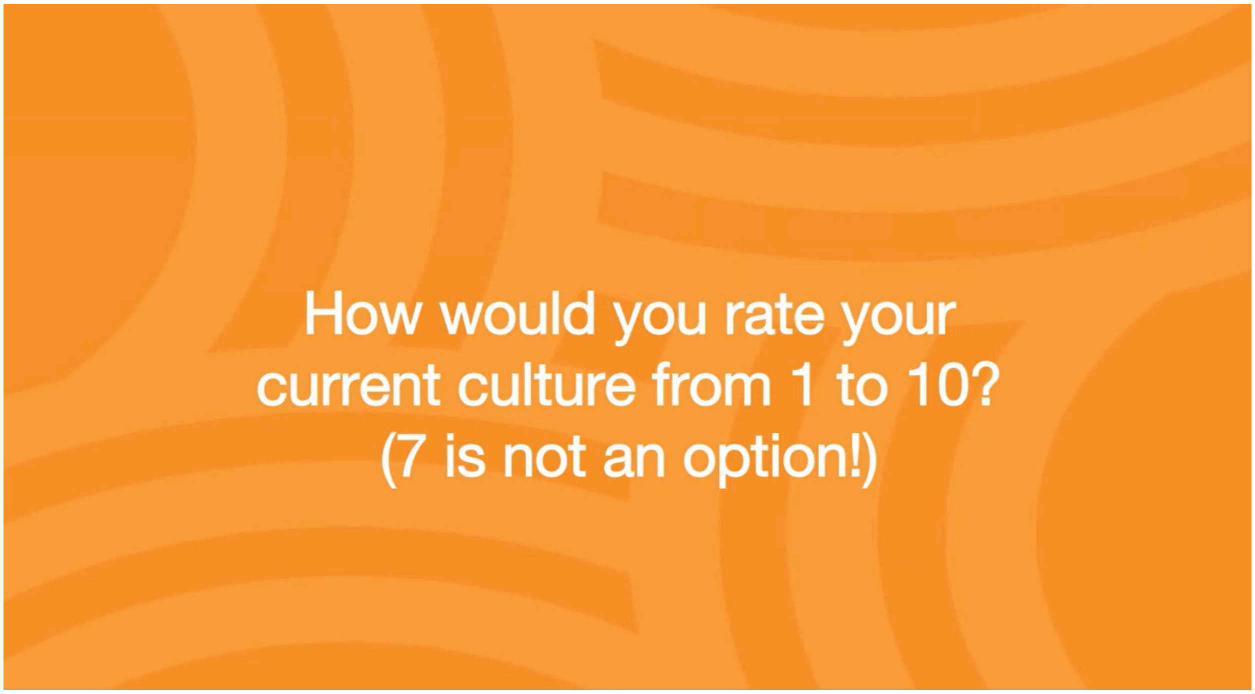
The most recent episode features a conversation with Dr. Linda Fried, a world-renowned geriatrician, public health expert, and Dean of Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. A pioneer in the science of healthy aging and frailty, Dr. Fried has dedicated her career to understanding how we can build systems and communities that support longer, healthier, and more purposeful lives.

Derek and Dr. Fried explore the medical realities of frailty, why physical activity is the best prevention strategy, and how public health systems must evolve to meet the needs of an aging population.

Denise kicked things off by giving a shoutout to attendees from different places and sharing a little slice of her current life in Key West, Florida. She joked about her New York accent and the perks of having fresh mangoes magically appear on her desk, though she clarified she didn't grow them herself (yet!).

She talked about how much she enjoys answering tough questions and is especially passionate about helping folks in the field understand the role of culture in supporting both staff and the people they serve. Denise has been involved in senior living since she was 16, starting as a dietary aide and nursing assistant, eventually working her way up to executive director roles in New Jersey and Connecticut. For the past 13 years, she's been running her own company, Drive, which helps organizations across the country improve their culture.

Denise broke down the concept of culture in a simple, memorable way, calling it "the way things work around here." She drew a clear line between culture and employee engagement, pointing out that while they're closely related, they're not the same. Culture is the actual environment and norms in a workplace, while engagement is how people *feel* about that environment. So, culture is what shapes engagement, either positively or negatively.



Denise steered the conversation deeper into organizational culture by asking everyone to rate their own workplace culture on a scale from 1 to 10 but with a twist: sevens weren't allowed. She called out how people tend to use seven as a neutral "safe" answer, and encouraged folks to really think about it.

Then she made an important point: the way leaders experience culture is often very different from how nonsupervisory team members do. Leadership usually gets more communication, more respect, and more transparency, which can skew their perception. Just because a leader sees the culture as an "eight" doesn't mean others would agree. She emphasized the importance of actually talking to people and asking about their experiences to really understand how culture plays out across the organization.

Denise shared how she uses a culture assessment tool based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to measure organizational culture (yes, it's actually measurable). She first learned about it at Cornell and was intrigued because most places only track satisfaction or engagement. The tool asks three questions:

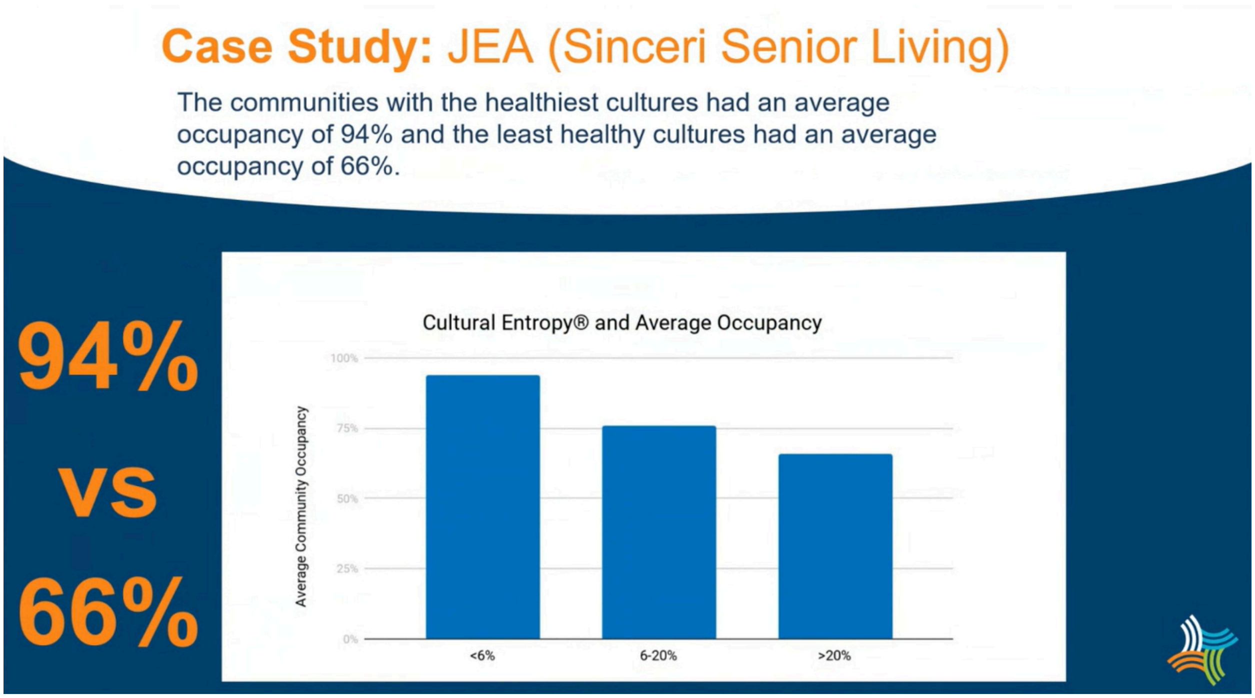
1. **Personal values** – What truly drives you right now? Who you are today.

2. **Current culture values** – How does your organization really operate? Could be teamwork and accountability… or could be blame and confusion.

3. **Desired culture values** – What would the culture look like if the organization reached its full potential?

She asked attendees to guess the most desired value in senior living. The surprising answer? *Accountability.* But it's shifted, from punishment and write-ups to people wanting clarity on roles so they can do their best and help others thrive.

Denise ended by busting the myth that "nobody wants to work anymore." That mindset has been around for centuries. It's not that people don't want to work, it's that they want work to have meaning and align with their values.



A case study from a senior living provider in Washington (now Sinceri) showed a clear link between culture and performance. Their sites with lower culture scores also had lower occupancy, while those with stronger cultures consistently performed better. After seeing this pattern multiple times during the assessment, the team brought in a researcher to dig deeper.

The results were striking: underperforming sites had an average occupancy of 66%, while sites with strong, healthy cultures averaged 94%. Same company, same systems, huge difference in outcomes. Culture wasn't just a feel-good concept; it had a direct impact on business results.

At this year's SMASH conference, a client reached out to share something unexpected: they were presenting data on their culture assessment score and its link to occupancy. This was a newer organization aiming to build a consistent mission, vision, and culture across all communities from the start. They wanted to avoid the usual ups and downs that come from inconsistency.

What they found echoed earlier case studies: as their culture improved, so did their occupancy. In fact, they tracked specific communities where culture scores rose and saw parallel increases in occupancy. One standout example showed a dip in both scores after a leadership change, reinforcing just how sensitive culture and performance can be to internal shifts.

The client's takeaway was powerful: "You can't afford not to invest in this." Whether or not a specific tool is used, the key message was about being *intentional* with culture. Too many organizations claim to have a great culture without actually cultivating it. The challenge is to stop letting culture happen by default and start shaping it deliberately.

The culture tool in use isn't just for senior living, it's the same one trusted by global brands like Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons, Unilever, Coca-Cola, Mastercard, and even the UK's National Health System. Major consulting firms like Accenture use it too. Around the world, it's considered the gold standard for measuring organizational culture, and Drive has become the largest user of it in the field over the past 8 years.

The results speak for themselves: lower employee turnover, higher occupancy, increased revenue, and reduced expenses thanks to less reliance on overtime and agency staffing. It all connects back to culture. When turnover drops, teams stabilize, and staff can bring their authentic, compassionate, and empathetic selves to work. That consistency doesn't just benefit employees, it improves the customer experience too.

There’s a personal values assessment available for anyone who wants to try it out. Just scan the QR code and use the password **Drive** with a capital D. Don’t make up your own password (a common mistake); just type in "Drive" exactly as given.

Once you enter your email, you’ll be prompted to choose 10 values from a list that reflect who you are right now. You’ll get a personalized report showing how those values align with living a greater purpose and some insight into how you’re wired. It’s a great tool for self-reflection, especially if you’ve been feeling off. People often realize they’ve been neglecting parts of themselves, like creativity, and it explains the frustration they’ve been carrying. It’s something you can do after the session to better understand how well your daily life aligns with your core values.

QUESTIONS

DID CONTINENTAL (OR OTHER ORGANIZATIONS) INTENTIONALLY UPDATE OR ALIGN THEIR STATED VALUES BASED ON EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK AND DESIRED CULTURE TRAITS, LIKE ACCOUNTABILITY, OR DID THOSE VALUES NATURALLY REFLECT WHAT PEOPLE WERE ALREADY ASKING FOR?

Continental's values, like accountability, teamwork, caring, honesty, and valuing people, were directly shaped by what their team members identified as most important. The organization co-created those values using the desired culture data from staff. Other organizations have done the same, like Sequoia Living in San Francisco. Many organizations saw major gains in accountability and overall culture scores after aligning their values this way.

Not every organization takes this route. Some stick with existing values, but even then, the focus becomes making those values more real and actionable based on what the team is experiencing.

HAVE YOU SEEN SITUATIONS WHERE A DISCONNECT FORMS BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND FRONTLINE STAFF—ALMOST LIKE A CLASS SYSTEM—WHERE LEADERS THINK THE CULTURE IS GREAT, BUT EMPLOYEES FEEL UNHEARD OR AFRAID TO SPEAK UP? AND IF SO, HOW HAVE YOU ADDRESSED THAT KIND OF DIVIDE IN YOUR WORK?

Sometimes leadership and staff culture scores align closely, but other times there's a big gap, like 25 vs. 70+. This disconnect often happens because culture is treated as vague or "soft", even though research shows it impacts every major outcome, including financials.

She compared it to a CFO saying they didn't look at the numbers but had a gut feeling about the financials. Something no board would accept. Yet that's how many treat culture. The difference in high-performing organizations? They measure culture intentionally and prioritize actions like accountability, mentoring, or leadership to drive real change.

IN A LARGE COMPANY THAT'S LAUNCHING A NEW BUSINESS LINE, HOW DO YOU BALANCE ALIGNING WITH THE PARENT COMPANY'S CULTURE WHILE ALSO BUILDING A DISTINCT CULTURE FOR THE NEW COMPANY? HOW CAN LEADERSHIP DRIVE ACCOUNTABILITY AND IMPROVE EMPLOYEE RETENTION DURING THAT SHIFT?

Denise called out how common and costly 90-day turnover has become, despite all the effort that goes into hiring. She was clearly frustrated but also confident it’s fixable with intentional action.

She shared an example using a culture tool for mergers that compares two organizations’ values and pinpoints alignment and friction. In one case, over 1,000 employees at two different organizations had nearly identical top personal and desired values. Still, she noted that their current culture varied greatly, reminding leaders that aligning values isn’t enough, you have to manage culture on purpose.