



## Continuum CEO focuses on building from within

By Kaitlyn Krasselt Published 3:13 pm, Wednesday, June 17, 2015

The key to leadership is simple, according to Continuum of Care CEO [Patti Walker](#).

“It’s about building a team,” Walker said. “It sounds simplistic, but it’s true.”

Walker was the featured speaker for Withers Bergman’s “Inside the Entrepreneurial Mind speaker” series Tuesday at the [Delamar Hotel](#) in Greenwich.

Walker has been the CEO for Continuum, a not-for-profit agency focused on serving people with mental illness and other disabilities, for 32 years. The company, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, began as a small organization with an annual operating budget of less than \$100,000. Now Continuum’s \$40 million annual budget employs more than 700 people in 41 locations throughout Connecticut.

“A lot has changed since we were just a little grassroots organization,” Walker said. “The hardest part for me is I don’t know everyone by name anymore and that kills me. You just can’t with 700 employees, but I used to know the names of everyone’s husband and their kids. I still make a conscious effort to be out there ... but when you have to start letting go, it’s very difficult.”

As the company continues to grow, Walker’s focus remains on serving the mission of the company and making sure she’s got the people in place who will do that best. Walker said high standards for hiring combined with constant strategic reevaluation and a positive work environment are just some of the things contributing to the success of Continuum, and are traits that are transferable to for-profit companies.

“I have built an amazing team,” Walker said. “You have to hire well, but it goes beyond the credentials. They have to have a true passion for the work you’re doing and you have to nurture your staff and make it a family.”

Walker said the family-like atmosphere can be difficult to maintain with 700 employees, but it's something she strives for nonetheless.

"Anyone in leadership will tell you, you have to nurture the strengths of your employees and then you have to let them go, let them do their thing and thrive," Walker said. "You can't micromanage them even if you want to."

Walker said she also finds herself to be competitive as a leader — she's constantly focused on what the company can do better, either by improving an existing program or by adding a new one to serve another aspect of the population Continuum targets. She said she's competitive both with herself as well as other organizations, even as a nonprofit.

"Obviously, I don't want our competition to do poorly, because they're also doing good work," Walker said. "But I grew up on a baseball field and I have a competitive nature. ... We take care of people better than anyone else, and the goal is to keep it that way by providing the best service possible."

Walker said she meets weekly with her executive team to promote a cohesive work environment and make sure everyone is working toward the same objectives. And while she no longer has her hands in every project Continuum is working on, Walker makes sure she's up to date on everything and serves as a sounding board to help her employees thrive. Part of Continuum's success, Walker said, can be attributed to the tendency to build high-level and mid-level management from within the company.

"Everyone on the executive team except maybe one has moved up from within the company, so our philosophy is already ingrained in their work," Walker said. "We have a saying here that the only people that leave are the people we want to leave ... and that doesn't happen very often."

Walker said while it's unfortunate to realize an employee isn't performing as expected, it's just as important to fire well as it is to hire well.

"You have to be consistent and transparent," Walker said. "But if someone isn't meeting the standards of the company, if they're not respecting the client, you don't want them there. We get rid of them quickly."

Walker described the company as her baby — she’s watched it grow for more than three decades. But after 32 years, she is thinking about the next in line to take care of the company she’s nurtured.

“I don’t know that I ever expected to be a CEO,” Walker said. “But I’m glad it worked out that way.”

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