

Ecumen, an operator of senior living centers, finds that the best ideas come from motivated employees – not hired hands.



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Trista Grimm carried a load of sandwiches and cookies for a lunch at Kato Engineering prepared by Gourmet Apron, a catering business created by the cooks at the Mankato Lutheran Home. An employee-recognition project encourages employees of Ecumen Inc. to think of bold ideas for its 82 senior residences.

Cooking up winning innovations

By H.J. CUMMINS
hcummins@startribune.com

When the cooks at the Mankato Lutheran Home wanted to set up a catering business on the side, it was just the far-fetched kind of idea their company was looking for.

Ecumen Inc., the Shoreview-based operator of 82 senior residences, has spent the past two years encouraging employees to think of bold ideas to make the centers as fine as they can be for the residents. The cooks formed Gourmet Apron, which catered enough business lunches and graduation parties to bring in an extra \$34,000 for the home.

The brainchild of dining services director Shelly Sabatka won her a "wooden acorn" award.

No money. No trip to Hawaii. No gift coupons to take shopping. A wooden acorn. And Sabatka likes it that way.

"It's for the greater good of 150 residents," she said. "It's also one reason our employees are proud to say they

work here."

The cooks also enjoy experimenting with recipes such as blue cheese-stuffed mushrooms and almond cake with raspberry filling, Sabatka said.

The acorn — the small seed that brings big things — is a symbolic award in the new employee-recognition project at Ecumen, whose senior housing centers are mostly in rural Minnesota.

Ecumen is one of many workplaces now choosing recognition awards over cash as employee incentives, based on the growing research into the psychology of motivation.

Money still is important in some jobs. And non-cash recognition programs can backfire if employees feel the company is just trying to get by on the cheap, said Paula Godar, a specialist at Maritz Inc. in St. Louis, which administers reward and recognition programs for client companies.

Ecumen continues: A symbolic, non-cash award has value: "People can be very motivated by recognition." **D8 ▶**



Grimm prepared sandwiches as Shelly Sabatka, right, readied desserts for a Gourmet Apron tasting for brides. Sabatka, dining services director at the Mankato Lutheran Home, conceived the catering business as a way to boost revenue for Ecumen.

Cooking up innovations wins rewards

◀ ECUMEN FROM D1

"But the value of a symbolic award is great," Godar added. "People can be very motivated by recognition from their managers and peers.

"Being held up as a role model can be more important than some extra money in your paycheck that would go for food and gas, and you wouldn't really notice it, anyway," she said.

Motivational makeover

Two years ago, Ecumen began reinventing itself from a chain of old-style nursing homes to the assortment of services and living arrangements that seniors now want, said Kathy Bakkenist, vice president of operations.

"We trust that our employees can help us determine what that future is," Bakkenist said.

To that end, Ecumen created its "Innovation Station," a website where employees can share successful ideas. With that came a system of rewards, including the acorns for good ideas and "fertile ground awards" for employees who apply those good ideas at their workplace, said Jessica Drecktrah, director of special projects.

Sabatka's catering business was one winning idea. Another is the Cascade Cafe in Ecumen's new Lakeshore center in Duluth. The kitchen staff operates the cafe on the side. And because it's open to the public, the clientele is a mixture of senior residents, neighborhood walkers and occasionally young snowboarders on their way to the North Shore slopes, Ecumen spokesman Eric Schubert said.

A maintenance and environmental services director at another senior center figured out how to put the many machines — electrical systems, furnaces and medical equipment, for example — online so that his crew can monitor them by computer, or even by cell phone.

Wise managers recognize



Betty Tapper served lunch to Pat Russell in the independent living part of the Mankato Lutheran Home. The residence's Gourmet Apron catering business grew from an idea shared on parent company Ecumen's "Innovation Station" website.

the importance of engaging the hearts and minds of employees, Godar said.

Companies sometimes call these internal ideas "intra-preneurship," said Leo Brajkovich, an executive consultant at Gantz Wiley, a Minneapolis-based business strategies research firm.

Cash may or may not be king

Cash still works well for jobs that traditionally include it as a routine part of compensation — sales commissions or annual executive bonuses fall into that category, Godar said.

But when workers don't feel well paid, employers should avoid the symbolic kinds of recognitions, Brajkovich said.

"You can't just give people a plaque if they are feeling generally under-compensated," he said. "They're likely to see it as a hollow gesture."

A recent Maritz study found that only about one-fourth of employees who said they appreciate symbolic awards get them, and only about one-fourth of employees who pre-

fer money get it.

That's why Drecktrah asked the leaders of some Ecumen operations what they and their staff would like. They said there has to be some serious competition, because if every idea gets equal recognition it becomes meaningless. So Ecumen now honors a select group of ideas at an annual meeting with "Seedling Awards."

Symbolic rewards usually are well received in caring professions, where it's not just money that motivates people.

A popular middle way, Godar said, is recognition programs that award points to recognize good work. Workers can use them to buy rewards typically offered in a catalog of choices.

Maritz's research indicates that employees are more likely to talk about non-cash rewards.

"If your neighbor notices you have a new TV, you're probably going to say, 'I won that for a good idea at work,'" Godar said. "To talk about money with your neighbor

feels a little braggy."

One Innovation Station idea succeeded by applying the same kind of public acknowledgement to residents who reached a fitness goal.

At The Oaks and The Pines senior housing in Hutchinson, the centers threw a party after residents walked enough miles to say they had "walked to Chicago."

Staff, residents and townspeople put together an "Oprah Winfrey" show, with volunteer "Oprah" and guests. A local business gave everyone a thematic T-shirt.

It was so much fun, the residents already started their next "walk," Drecktrah said. "They want a biker party," she said. "The next destination they chose was Sturgis."

H.J. Cummins • 612-673-4671



Grimm wrapped sandwiches for a catered lunch. Gourmet Apron catered enough business lunches and graduation parties to bring in an extra \$34,000 for the Mankato senior residence.

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Shelly Sabatka, Mankato Lutheran Home dining services director, about winning a "wooden acorn" award for her idea to start the Gourmet Apron catering service



Trista Grimm loaded a Mankato Lutheran Home van with sandwiches, soup and cookies for 30 people at Kato Engineering, where Gourmet Kitchen served lunch.

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