

Leading through change

After nearly a decade leading Amana Living through one of aged care's most transformative periods, CEO Stephanie Buckland has learned the best decisions aren't always the easiest. Real leadership, she says, is staying connected to the people you work with.

"No year has been the same as the previous year," she says. "Every year has been different." It's a simple sentence, but it captures the reality of guiding an aged care organisation through one of the most challenging periods the sector has ever seen.

From the Royal Commission to the new Aged Care Act, from workforce shortages to digital transformation, the pressure has been constant. Yet Stephanie says the work has energised her and given her purpose.

"What keeps me going is knowing we're serving real people. The feedback we receive is overwhelmingly positive. And when it's not, it's still valuable — an opportunity to do better. In this sector there is no end of need."

That thought — "no end of need" — shapes how she leads. It's why she and her team focus on using limited resources where they can make the greatest difference.

A career built on community impact

Stephanie didn't follow a traditional path into aged care. Her career spans Pfizer, Bankwest and Tourism WA, where she first became a CEO. Each role taught her something different: financial discipline, service delivery, and the power of work that strengthens communities.

"What I loved most about Tourism WA was the impact the work had on thousands of small businesses across Western Australia. Seeing those businesses grow and the communities thrive was incredibly fulfilling."

It confirmed something important for her: she wanted to lead an organisation where the work directly improves people's lives. Aged care offered exactly that — with the added complexity of a system that is constantly changing.

Staying connected to the frontline

Every week, Stephanie sends a newsletter to all staff. At the bottom is a button: 'Reply to Stephanie'. When someone clicks it, the message goes straight to her inbox.

"I read it and I respond to it," she says. Some of those messages have led to changes in manual handling training and fire evacuation procedures, with frontline staff now working directly with safety managers.

"People don't want to feel they're talking to a brick wall. It's not just about listening; it's about demonstrating you're doing something with it. You acknowledge the feedback, you work on it, and then you come back and say, 'In response to that, this is what we've done.'"

She's careful not to undermine managers or get pulled into daily operations. She shares the feedback with the right leaders, checks progress, and keeps her executive team focused on strategy.

"Every person has a story"

Stephanie's motto is simple: "Every person is an individual. Every person

has a story." One story she shares is about a man living in one of the centres who became distressed every evening. Staff couldn't work out why until they spoke with his family and learned he'd worked in security at what is now Crown Casino in Perth.

The realisation: his agitation stemmed from his ingrained work routine. Night time, for him, meant being on duty.

So, his family brought in his old security jacket. Each evening, the staff helped him put it on and walked with him to check the doors and windows. Once everything was "locked up properly," he'd hang up the jacket and go to bed peacefully.

"His agitation was gone and he was living a much happier life, with a renewed sense of purpose," Stephanie says.

For her, it's a reminder of what's possible when you truly understand the person in front of you — their history, their culture, their preferences, their story.

Courage in leadership

Courage is a quality Stephanie believes aged care leaders will need more than ever. Last year, Amana Living made one of its hardest decisions: transitioning its Kalgoorlie services to Respect Aged Care, a provider specialising in regional aged care.

"That required courage," she says. "To say, we don't think we're the best placed organisation to be providing those services in Kalgoorlie. We think somebody else can do it better."

For her, success isn't about being everywhere. It's about being where you can make the greatest difference.

The path ahead

Over the next 12 to 18 months, Amana Living's focus is technology transformation, leadership development and more integrated models of care.

"Success looks like systems that make it easier for our staff to do their jobs and give us insights to make better decisions."

She's also focused on using existing infrastructure more effectively, rather than expanding in ways that aren't financially sustainable.

And she's investing in leaders who can support teams through emotionally demanding work.

"Our managers need to help people stay resilient and positive, play to their strengths, and involve them in creating better solutions."

She also sees service models evolving — away from separated residential care, home care, and

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retirement living, toward integrated models that support people through their entire ageing journey.

What keeps her going

Stephanie is clear about balance. She takes her annual leave — "Nobody gets a medal for not using their annual leave" — spends time with family, walks her rescue dogs, and avoids late night emails.

"You can't be there for your people if you're emotionally and physically drained. Making space for my personal life means I respect everyone else needs that too."

Her advice to emerging leaders: spend time on the frontline, take

your leave, and don't shy away from complexity.

"There are a lot of really tough problems that need to be solved in our sector. Dive in there and work with your teams to solve them."

After nearly a decade of constant change, her energy hasn't faded. She says that what truly sustains her is knowing the work matters — that behind every decision, every system, every conversation, there are people living fuller, more dignified lives because someone took the time to listen, adapt and care. ■

Saleha Singh



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