

# Building competence

We need an action plan for aged care managers and leaders, write **PROFESSOR PHILIP TAYLOR** and **DR AMBER MILLS**.

The challenges involved in managing the aged care workforce are well known, as providers continue to grapple with difficulties relating to staffing levels, recruitment and retention, inadequate training, low pay and lack of career pathways.

Also well known is that skilled middle management and senior leadership enable competent workers and high-quality care.

While workforce issues were highlighted by the royal commission and put under the spotlight during the Covid-19 pandemic, less attention was given to the qualifications and ongoing professional development of managers and leaders in the sector.

The findings of Australian Association of Gerontology's recent study – published in the report *Essential capabilities for managing an aged care workforce* – highlight the critical need to better understand the nature and challenges of aged care management and leadership, and the influence of leadership styles on the workforce and quality of care.

Managing the aged care workforce demands a wide range and high level of skills. To build workforce capacity and reduce staff turnover, we need to look at building the competence of the people who are running the services.

Simplistic approaches to management do not help managers deal with the complex operational issues they face on a daily basis, so we are surprised that some aspects of management and leadership in this sector seem to be overlooked.

For example, much has been written about the importance of employee retention, but there is relatively little evidence-based guidance on how to best manage the process of recruiting workers into aged care.

Similarly, the attention given to worker-related topics such as motivation, wellbeing, bullying, equality and diversity, shift work, staffing levels and skill mix vastly overshadows the critical issues of management and leadership in a sector that is particularly challenging.

We should know the most effective leadership style for the aged care context, but we are still unclear on fundamental questions like the relationships between leadership style – such as transformative, authentic or caring – and team functioning, job satisfaction and quality of care.

Another discrepancy is seen in the vast body of literature on managing staff in residential aged care compared to community care settings, despite most older adults preferring to age in their own homes.

It should be a priority to examine how the leadership competences and qualities for residential aged care differ to those needed in the growing home care sector.



Professor Philip Taylor



Dr Amber Mills

The report includes a summary of the leadership skills, qualities and capabilities required by aged care managers. Communication and interpersonal skills are at the top of the list, but human resource and financial management skills, as well as a good understanding of government policy, are also important.

Personal qualities for leaders and managers include a can-do attitude, fairness and integrity, and being mission focused.

While these characteristics might sound familiar – and even obvious – management and leadership competencies and qualities for the aged care workforce are often generic and not context-specific to aged care.

A further issue is that even when these factors are identified, there is little guidance in how this information is translated into development activities, real-world implementation and systematic evaluation.

We need quality case studies to illustrate effective training and competency building among those running aged care facilities and leading teams. These case studies could include stories on how aged care workers benefit from efforts to address the skill needs of leaders and managers.

Our review identified several frameworks that seek to set out the competency requirements of aged care managers – including Australia's almost decade-old Aged Care Leadership Capability Framework – but these have been criticised for being too complex, taking a one-size-fits-all approach, reinforcing hierarchy and assuming that competences remain the same as people climb the ladder.

The aged care sector also needs to enable pathways for those moving in and out of management and leadership roles.

In response to these findings, we are calling for a national action plan for aged care managers and leaders. We also recommend that consideration be given to establishing a national taskforce on aged care management and leadership.

Problematising leadership and management alone will not resolve all the challenges facing aged care. Still, there is a clear need to establish and support a competent tier of middle management and senior leadership. Understanding the nature and challenges of aged care leadership and management is critical. ■

**Professor Philip Taylor** – who authored the report – is convenor of Australian Association of Gerontology's Ageing, Workforce and Education Special Interest Group and a recent recipient of AAG's Glenda Powell Travelling Fellow award

**Dr Amber Mills** is AAG's policy and research manager  
Access the report at [aag.asn.au/libraryviewer?ResourceID=266](http://aag.asn.au/libraryviewer?ResourceID=266)