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Lisa Brush, CMA, COO,  
Sunrise REIT

## Care at the core

Lisa Brush, CMA, insists strong principles drive effective operations. At Sunrise REIT, she proves it.

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## **Principled care**

**For Lisa Brush, CMA, strong principles should sit at the core of a successful business. Making those central to operations makes the bottom line fall into place naturally. At Sunrise REIT, she's helping make this happen**

Balance is a word that we all bandy about, but rarely do many of us ever quite achieve it. In fact, as often as not, we give up the fight and compromise – sometimes probably more than we should. Work-life balance is usually the first to suffer, but it happens in other areas as well – profit trumps public good, personal gain trumps the success of the team.

And yet the reality is that leaders who achieve better balance get better results. Lisa Brush, CMA, is an example of just such a person. Her successes have been many and varied. At the age of 30 she had been named CEO of a significant regional player in southwestern Ontario's real estate sector – at the same time raising a family of five with her husband. While she has always been driven to succeed at work, as chief operating officer for Sunrise REIT, an owner of seniors residences, she understands that strong principles drive a strong company, and that it's how these are managed that make all of the difference – for her and the success of the business.

## **Sunrise**

The demand for quality seniors' residences is growing as the baby boomer generation hits their 60s and 70s. That demand will only develop further as the number of seniors over the age of 70 skyrockets in the next 10 to 20 years. Brush has watched that real estate sector blossom during her career in the industry, and is now a part of one of the most successful property owners in North America within this niche. Brush insists that the secret to its success is solid principles, driven throughout the organization.

Sunrise REIT is a two-year-old trust that owns 74 Assisted Living Communities and currently has seven properties in development. Altogether, over 6000 residents live in their properties – 95% occupancy – and a further 812 spaces will be made available in the new communities

All of the REIT's communities are managed by Sunrise Senior Living, Inc. (Sunrise Inc.), one of the largest providers of senior living services in North America. All communities are developed to feature Sunrise's award-winning architecture and high-quality interior designs, all intended to enhance the quality of life for each resident.

The objectives of the REIT are to provide unit holders with stable and growing monthly cash distributions from its portfolio of income-producing properties and to enhance the long-term value of the REIT's assets and maximize unit value.

## **Better care**

Sunrise Inc. has been in business since 1981, when Paul and Terry Klaassen (CEO and Chief Cultural Officer, respectively, of the business) started construction on their first eight-bed nursing home. "They got into the business because of their own experience of caring for elderly and ill family members," notes Brush. "In Terry's case, she helped her father care for her terminally ill mother at home, because they found the only other option would be impersonal institutional care. Paul, meanwhile, saw both of his grandmothers

very well taken care of in senior's homes in Holland, where their care was much more personal. These experiences really left an impression."

Both believed that seniors could be cared for and enjoy a better quality life. They opened the original Sunrise in Oakton, Virginia, living in the home through its first year. Through that experience they developed a set of principles on which Sunrise Inc. was developed.

"People in real estate or apartment management, really discount the value of building a strong culture," says Brush. "But the consistency you're able to find when you have that vision at the top creates a very powerful culture."

### **Operations – the cornerstone**

Brush first joined Sunrise Inc. in 2004 as a vice-president of operations for the west coast. "I spent my first six months in Chicago getting my feet wet," she says. "Then, I spent one and a half years in California, managing 60 properties on the west coast." In February 2006 she was brought into Sunrise REIT as COO.

Chicago was a training ground for Brush, the last externally hired VP. "People are generally developed internally here because to lead the company you really have to understand the communities," she explains. "In assisted living, if there isn't an operations focus, the financial challenges follow. In Sunrise Inc., the VPs of operations really carry the most clout. They are responsible for the communities in the field – the quality of the operations, residence satisfaction, developing teams in the field. All of that comes from the core principles created at the top and encouraged throughout the organization".

"Whenever I landed at the airport, I would head straight to the properties I was in charge of. I'd be there to help with marketing issues, leadership challenges, and developing the area teams – anything that went on in those properties. I knew that if I looked after the quality of service and the team members, the bottom line would take care of itself."

And Brush spent a lot of time on airplanes. During that 18 months, she managed the launch of five new properties in California and managed the existing properties. About half of that time, she was working from home in Sarnia, Ont.

"The founders and senior executives of Sunrise Inc. have kids of their own, so they understand the need to integrate family and career and have always been supportive of me maintaining my home in Sarnia."

### **Relationship building**

In early 2006 several events came together that made the move to Sunrise REIT a great opportunity, including a change in the field reporting structure and consolidation of VP positions at Sunrise Inc. Also Brush had been working remotely from home in Sarnia, Ont., logging a lot of air miles traveling back and forth to California. With a full house, kids and a husband back home, she had no wish to pull up roots just yet. That's when the role of COO opened up at Sunrise REIT.

In her new role, Brush manages the relationship with Sunrise Inc., while at the same time evaluating acquisition opportunities. The REIT itself is a tight ship – 20 employees, with our accounting group in Toronto. With its strategic alliance with Sunrise Inc., as the REIT buys properties, they are offered to Sunrise Inc. first to manage.

Her early training at Sunrise Inc, as well as her financial knowledge, made Brush ideal for the COO role. Because she has worked in the communities, Brush is able to explain to investors the value of the REIT.

“There’s lots of long-term planning at Sunrise, we choose our markets very carefully,” she notes. “At the same time, the REIT needed someone who could explain that to the street on their own terms. They also needed someone who could really explain how we could enhance the value in a property.

“A lot of what I do involves understanding my audience,” Brush explains. “Similar to my former role at Sunrise Inc., I still visit our current operations and find out what the challenges are, while at the same time communicating with the REIT executive and board to make sure they understand changes that are being made. Each audience speaks a different language. Operations managers speak in terms of resident care, analysts look at the bottom line....since in my estimation we are ultimately talking about the same thing, I make sure each gets the right message about what we’re aiming for.”

### **Roots of success**

Brush has had a remarkable career thus far. Before going back to school at the University of Windsor, she spent three years working as a hairdresser in her home town of Montreal. When she decided to leave the city at 19 to go back to school, she wanted a change of pace. “I didn’t want to be in another big city,” she says.

By the age of 25, Brush had graduated with an MBA and found a job in operations management with Steeves and Rozema (S&R), a real estate company that carries a mixed portfolio, including apartments, commercial buildings and 15 retirement and long term care communities.

“I started out consulting for S&R,” she recalls. “The owners were considering buying some properties and I was able to save them a substantial amount of money on the purchase.”

Brush was with S&R for 12 years and became CEO after five.

“It was a lot of fun working there,” she says. “I helped set up the basic systems to support the operations there, like proper budgets and financial systems. And in my last five years with them, we doubled the size of the company’s holdings (which now includes more than 2 million square feet of real estate).”

But after 12 years, the owners and Brush had a different outlook of the future.

“I wanted to encourage faster growth but the owners wanted to develop more slowly. It made sense for me to begin looking elsewhere – if I had to get the owners out of their comfort zone, I didn’t want to do that. But they were always very supportive of me, helping me through my CMA program and supporting the way I ran and set the direction of the company for seven years.”

Brush also wanted a “big company” experience – a company with a broader reach, and a philosophy of growth that matched hers.

“I did a lot of research in the U.S. and talked to a number of different companies. When I was looking at leaving S&R, there weren’t many large companies working in assisted living. Assisted living is more challenging than other types of real estate because there’s a very substantial ‘people’ side to the business – it’s complicated and challenging but more rewarding when you do it right. People are willing to pay for what they want in this space.”

After about a year of researching her options, Brush sat down with the CEO of Sunrise Inc. for a couple of hours and saw that he really knew operations – that the focus was in the right place.

**Critical focus**

As COO of Sunrise REIT, Brush is more involved with the accounting aspect of the business than ever before. However, she insists that she has always used her CMA knowledge.

“In operations, sometimes you have accountants telling you things that just don’t make sense. I can correct that and clarify such issues. But I also never separate my company’s vision and mission from the bottom line – one always feeds the other. If you can’t get your services up to snuff, you aren’t going to do well – it’s as simple as that.”

And in her business, Brush insists that the focus has to remain on residents and their families. “Peripheral issues like IT have to remain peripheral,” she notes. “Keeping a strong focus on the mission and vision and basic principles can help guide even IT initiatives.”