The provision of long-term residential support for elders and individuals with mental illness, traumatic brain injury, and other cognitive and neurological impairments is undergoing a significant change in American society. As the values of personal autonomy, resident and staff empowerment, person-centered supports, and collaborative decision making increasingly influence long term care organizations, greater attention has been focused on the Eden Alternative approach to culture change.

As part of the culture change lexicon, Eden represents a philosophical and practical departure from traditional and institutional ways of providing long-term living supports for elders and others with lifelong deficits.

It entails a process of organizational culture change toward a more humanistic and egalitarian system of organizational values, assumptions, and practices.

**First Of Its Kind**
The RidgeOak Living Program, Austin, Texas, an assisted living community that serves 15 individuals with a wide variety of cognitive, psychiatric, and behavioral needs, began its adoption of the Lifelong Living program following a change in top management two years ago. Created in conjunction with the Seaton Foundation, San Marco, Texas, the Lifelong Living program is aimed at direct support professionals as a training initiative to promote the person-centered model of care upon which the Eden Alternative tenets are based.

The Eden Lifelong Living training workshops examine the process of creating environments that enhance the well-being of both those who receive and those who provide support.

The goal of the project is to determine the benefits and application of the Eden Alternative principles and philosophy to long-term living environments for adults with cognitive disabilities. The Seaton Foundation has discovered that Eden’s humanistic philosophy and approach can be applied with great benefits to residential living environments for people with cognitive disabilities.

Eden teaches providers to see these environments as habitats for human beings rather than facilities for the
frail, elderly, or disabled. This holistic philosophy emphasizes person-centered supports and individual autonomy to the greatest extent possible; personal relationships and a sense of community between individuals; the inclusion of naturalistic elements such as plants, animals, and children in the living environment; and collaborative organizational decision making and responsibility.

As the first assisted living community of its kind to become Eden-certified, RidgeOak accomplished its mission through a gradual approach that included the addition and expansion of resident services, staff training modules, and multiple enhancements to the physical plant.

The Transformation
Among the most significant changes made at RidgeOak was the expansion of an array of activities, classes, outings, and community opportunities available to residents. In-home classes, such as cooking, landscaping, gardening, flower arranging, scrapbooking, vehicle maintenance, and computers, were added to the program services.

Specific training was implemented for all RidgeOak employees on the adoption of non-institutional terminology and values, non-confrontational behavior management, supportive problem solving, conflict management, and eventually on Eden principles and practices.

The facility’s myriad rules, clinical and behavioral interventions, restrictive daily routines, and general prohibitions were also rigorously examined. The result was the eventual elimination of many of these undignified and institutional practices.

In addition, a gradual shift was made toward the diffusion of authority and responsibility among employees at all levels in the organization: Shift supervisors were designated and empowered to make important decisions about day-to-day operations, anonymous employee satisfaction surveys were conducted, and employees were allowed to evaluate their supervisors as part of their own annual performance evaluations.

Volunteer opportunities were made available to residents so that each had a chance to contribute back to the community at large. Volunteer placements were established at the local animal shelter, Meals on Wheels program, and church-sponsored child care centers.
Live-in animals were also introduced, enabling residents to observe and interact with beings dependent on them and providing opportunities for residents to assume responsibility for feeding, grooming, and otherwise caring for them.

Resident involvement was sought to a much greater degree. Large and small decisions, including menu planning and meal preparation, activity choices, and animal adoption, were made with resident input. Residents were included in employee interviews.

A New Environment
The physical plant was modified to be more inviting and more interactive, including the addition of walking trails, outdoor benches, vegetable gardens and flower beds, a fire circle, and a Frisbee golf course.

Various rooms were painted in bright pastel colors, resident photos were hung, buildings renamed with less institutional names, plants were added indoors and out, and trees planted along the new walking trails.

A significant effort was made to enhance the sense of community and interconnectedness among and between employees and residents. Personal employee accomplishments and milestones such as promotions, weddings, and births were celebrated by the larger group, enhancing the social capital and cohesiveness of the group.

Weekend staff were encouraged to bring their children to work.
A quarterly newsletter was created and sent to families and funding sources, celebrating resident accomplishments, employee contributions, program changes, and the adoption of the Eden philosophy.

The Eden Lifelong Living principles themselves were taught, discussed at length with residents and staff, and eventually posted in the building foyer in order to symbolize RidgeOak’s commitment to these principles and the values underlying them. In short, RidgeOak culture was transformed.

The organization now has waiting lists for both residents and employees.

Challenges To Be Met
There were several challenges during the transition process. One of the most significant was changing the way employees of the organization viewed the residents and their role in supporting them. Some employees quickly embraced these changes, offering support, enthusiasm, and important ideas and suggestions.

Others seemed to prefer to withhold judgment about these changes, offering only verbal support and waiting to see whether this new path would result in improved care or organizational chaos. A few were never able to make the transition from the old culture where the emphasis was on medical and psychiatric deficits. These individuals eventually left the organization.

Positive Results
The adoption of Eden Lifelong Living principles and practices at RidgeOak has transformed what was once a rather unremarkable, small program into a vibrant, spontaneous, and joyful environment for employees and residents alike. The elimination of many restrictive rules, practices, and policies has created more time for individuals to interact together, to pursue their individual and collective interests, and to build a stronger sense of community.

One woman’s symptoms of schizophrenia, especially her paranoia and preoccupation with her own health issues, have moderated significantly.
“She is happier, more involved with other people, and more physically active than she has ever been,” said one staff member. “Volunteering in the community has helped her feel worthwhile again.”

Furthermore, as a result of these changes, several residents have been able to reduce or even eliminate their use of psychoactive medications. “Without the medications, my brother is happier, funnier, and more energetic,” said one family member.
“He feels useful, more productive, and more in control of his life.”

Employee absenteeism and turnover have been significantly reduced, dependence on psychoactive medication use has been lessened, and residents have reported a significantly greater degree of personal satisfaction and fulfillment. The organization now has waiting lists for both residents and employees.

Families are universally pleased by the changes in their loved ones, and employees report greater personal and employment satisfaction.

The success of culture change efforts at RidgeOak suggests that the Eden Lifelong Living principles, when applied in a gradual but systematic manner, can significantly improve the lives of those living and working in long-term living environments.

This movement takes the company away from the institutional deficit-oriented and treatment-driven mindset to a more person-centered approach that embraces both flexibility and self-determination and is built on the basic humanistic approach of “what kind of community would I like to live in.”

The provision of person-centered support requires listening and learning, focusing on what is important to the individual, and acting in alliance with them to accomplish their goals. It relies on a flexible support system based on personal choice and social inclusion.