

Building your
leadership
bench:
*what's essential
is ownership
and alignment*

Hero: *Michael Allen, CEO*

Goal: *Capacity building and leadership development*

SummitStone Health Partners has a long-standing legacy in the Larimer County community. For over sixty years, they've been transforming lives through recovery, renewal and respect by providing unsurpassed behavioral health prevention, intervention and treatment services.

When the current CEO Michael Allen joined the organization back in 2016, he knew the team was in transition. "We've almost doubled in size and we'll probably double again in three to four years. Almost the entire leadership team has turned over."

In November 2018, Michael began working with Trebuchet Group's Chris Hutchinson for one-on-one leadership coaching. He wanted to refine his skills, and knew the significance of the tasks ahead. With plans to grow on the horizon, Michael hoped to alleviate the typical drama that accompanies growth and establish new ways of working together as a team.

"I needed my Senior Leadership team to better understand each other, know our communication styles, and be consistent on why we do what we do, why we say what we say, and what roles we have."

building a team

In April 2019, Michael, Chris, and Trebuchet Group colleagues Gurudev Khalsa and Suzanne Coffman pulled the Senior Leadership team of seventeen directors and chiefs together for a goal-focused team building retreat. Over the course of two-days, the group established conflict norms, values, and rules of engagement they now use regularly. The norms now live on their meeting agendas, and are referred to in meetings. One employee even created a bookmark and distributed it to everyone on the team.

"That language is now part of our culture," said Michael. "When we're having a conversation or spinning and not on the same page, the question 'What does the business need?' has helped us a lot to keep us from spinning and spiraling, which is something we've historically done."

Michael was thrilled with the new found confidence in holding one another accountable. "We set out to put actual tools to use. We'd use whiteboards and agendas and kept our meetings structured."

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Michael Allen, CEO,
SummitStone Health Partners

Forming and norming takes time and trust. Michael spent the better part of a year working to clarify roles and allow for healthy conflict. He shared a peek into the practice and said, “Oh, it can be messy. We scrum, we argue, it’s great. I love spirited debate as well. But in the end, alignment is what we’re after. I’m not looking for 100% agreement, but I am looking for ownership and alignment. And if we can get there, that’s a win.”

relying on their backbone

March of 2020 changed the world for all of us. Mental health professionals and crisis workers amped up their response and charged ahead, knowing a wave of need would soon approach. The team at SummitStone was no exception.

Reflecting, Michael shared, “When COVID hit, we went remote in three days. It was a miracle that folks were able to pull that off. We never closed. We’ve always been here for our community. We can do a lot of things touch free, and if we need to be in your environment, we are equipped to safely do that too.

We had to rely on the disciplines we established as a team. And really, those became the backbone for how we were going to communicate, how we were going to make decisions, how we were going to handle crises, handle disagreements, be able to rely on those things. Thank goodness we did this work back in November, because when March hit six months later we had a little bit of practice.”

responding to crisis

By June, Michael and his team were seeing significant increases in demand for counseling and connection. “Certainly, pre-COVID, we had plenty of work to do and now with COVID, isolation, and increased alcohol sales, we expect more demand on our services. I think our community, our world, is going through a grief and loss process right now. We’re missing our socialization. We’re missing the things we used to do. We’re missing going out to eat. We’re missing our family. I think we’re going to pay for that emotionally and socially and we’re here to help navigate.

So, we’re actually bracing for that in moving a lot of our work upstream to open our front door so folks can be seen more readily. There are folks who will never walk into a mental health facility, or will never ask for help from a primary care doc, and that’s ok. We want to answer ‘How do we reach them too?’”

“Working with Trebuchet Group has been really helpful in navigating point A to B knowing it may not be a direct line. They allow the freedom and possibility to get where we need to go based on what the team needs.”

Michael Allen, CEO,
SummitStone Health Partners

His team worked to create innovative partnerships with the Health District of Northern Larimer County, and even established an emotional support line where anyone can pick up the phone and speak with someone. He reminded us, “Why wait? Waiting is not healthy.”

Michael was also able to rally his unified Senior Leadership team to increase communication and open up avenues for questions and clarifications for his 400 employees. Employees crave “... communication, communication, communication. I honestly don’t believe people are asking for more communication, I think they are asking for better communication.”

The SummitStone employees have all-staff town halls twice a week. They opened up an intranet for employees and now send bi-weekly newsletters with information including crisis updates, and shifts in openings and closures. In April Michael committed to his team, “I’ll keep doing these as long as folks show up.” Almost nine months later and he’s still holding the gatherings. “People want to feel heard, that they’re important, that we got this. If I’m not able to be there, other Leadership team members can. Sometimes I lean on folks, but just the presence, I think, is important.”

continuously improving

As the world continues to adjust and hope for a return to normal life, the team at SummitStone expects to see long-lasting impacts on mental health. Michael knows the road ahead may be long. And he is confident his team is better prepared now than they were even a year ago.

“We have a core value that says we’re continuously improving. Our core value is not, ‘we’re perfect.’ We can lean on that when we do make mistakes, which is going to happen, and can give us some grace.”

With plans to strengthen his Board and the Corporate Leadership Team, and to examine diversity, equity and inclusion in their work, the months ahead will be busy. Michael continues to rely on the backbone Trebuchet Group helped form.

“We were able to set goals together and say, here’s what we want at the end of this, kind of how we want to get there, flexible enough in how we get there. Working with Trebuchet Group has been really helpful in navigating point A to B knowing it may not be a direct line. They allow the freedom and possibility to get where we need to go based on what the team needs.”