

10 Things Healthcare Leaders Must Do to Create a Culture of Safety

What does it take to improve population safety? The safest healthcare organizations are those that have transformed their organizational culture to one focused on safety. Safe hospitals not only implement safety processes and procedures, but maintain the vigilant attitude and ongoing commitment needed to prevent adverse events at their facilities. And it starts at the top.

An organization can improve and maintain safety standards only when leaders are visibly committed to patient welfare, and they create an environment where staff can report unsafe or hazardous conditions without fear of retaliation.

What do the executive leaders of healthcare organizations need to do to perpetuate a culture of vigilance and safety?

1 Publicly embrace the importance of patient safety. Leaders must be on the front lines, educating their staff and communicating the direction of the organization. The CEO should share his or her vision with the entire organization while the other C-suite executives meet individually with their own internal organizations. To emphasize the importance leadership is putting on safety, senior leaders, including C-suite executives and board members, should institute patient safety rounds. During the rounds, the leadership group might visit different patient care units to discuss safety with department heads and staff. These rounds can also be used to informally gather information on the success of safety initiatives as well as areas where more improvements could be made.

2 Make safety the over-arching priority of the facility. Employees need to be encouraged to prioritize safety over any other corporate goal including cost savings and productivity.

3 Create benchmarks to track safety improvements. Leaders need to determine what a safety culture will look like for the facility and then measure progress towards it. Measurements will determine which of the implemented safety changes are working and which are not. Facilities need to use benchmarking to stay on course and not waste time on failing or failed safety initiatives.

4 Empower subordinates. The directors and managers within the healthcare organization must have clear direction, communication and leadership from those above and every department and employee must play an active role in transforming the culture. Staff needs to be responsible for creating a safe work environment and be empowered to take the necessary actions to improve safety. For instance, if a nurse or technician sees a vendor representative walking through the halls without proper credentials, they need to have the confidence and authority to stop that person and direct them to security or the front desk.

5 Involve everyone in developing a system with consistent rules and guidelines across the organization. Each individual and group has a unique perspective on what needs to be done to maintain vigilance and protect patients. Cross-functional teams should work together to find solutions for patient safety issues.



6 Do not allow exemptions in the organization. No one, including the physicians, administrative staff or the C-suite executives, should be able to bypass the safety net in place. If any one group has an exemption, it undermines the integrity of the entire system.

7 Give everyone a voice. There must be a simple, safe way for anyone in the healthcare facility to voice a complaint or a suggestion. Moreover, these concerns and inquiries must get appropriate attention at the proper levels. This means that a custodian who notices visitors regularly bypassing the check-in system knows exactly where to bring that concern and who will handle it. In order to keep employees engaged, they need to be able to trust that action will be taken on any unsafe conditions they report.

8 Create an organizational predisposition towards continuous improvement. When a problem does occur, leaders must focus on improving the system rather than on placing blame. In turn, everyone in the organization must be willing to change rather than continue with the practices that lead to the safety issue.

9 Ensure that the goal of delivering safe patient services be viewed as a never-ending effort. Setting up the culture of safety and vigilance is just the first step. Improving safety must be seen as a journey, not a program that ends once certain goals have been reached.

10 Create a legacy of vigilance strong enough to last. The goal of an executive team should be to create a culture of safety resilient enough to continue even when they leave the organization. This happens when the organization realizes and regularly celebrates the results of such vigilance. A well-established culture of safety will not be dependent on any one leader or group.

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