

# PATIENT-CENTERED EXCELLENCE IN THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT

INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

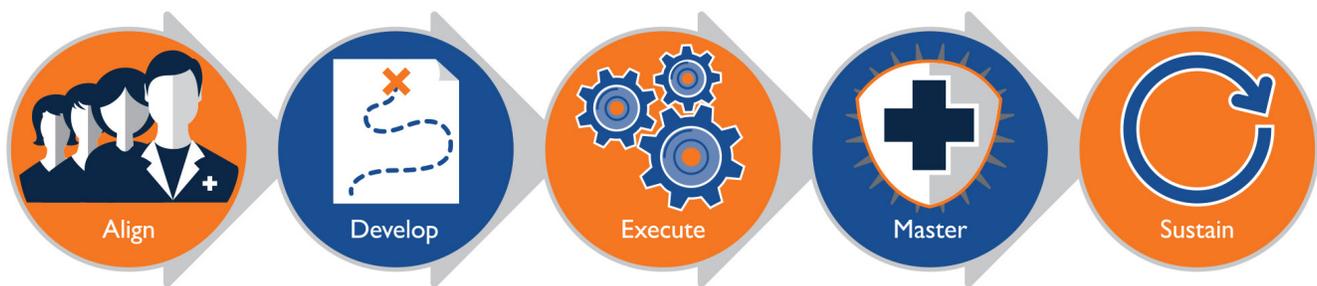
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*Healthcare's Leader in Workforce Development*

As the healthcare industry evolves, leaders continue to search for new and more effective ways to meet the growing demands and expectations of patients, payors, and regulators. In no place is this more true than in a hospital's emergency department (ED) where leaders face mounting pressure to improve metrics and achieve better outcomes in a fast-paced, hectic environment, often with fewer resources. HealthStream Engagement Institute coaches follow a six point plan for enhancing the performance of an emergency department that incorporates the HealthStream Engagement Institute's coaching model. The six points are: aligning culture with vision, developing accountable leaders, selecting and retaining engaged staff, committing to patient-centered behavior and flow, execution, and mastery and sustaining of results. Many high-performing ED leaders have followed a similar path and have discovered how the points build upon each other to yield the desired outcomes.

## The HealthStream Engagement Institute Coaching Model



The five components of the HealthStream Engagement Institute coaching model. The model recognizes that achieving and sustaining excellence is challenging and that no single element is sufficient to achieve comprehensive, sustainable results. Instead, leaders need to focus in a purposeful way, beginning with establishing a clear vision.

## The Six Point Plan



### 1 Align the ED Culture with the Organizational Vision

Achieving the pinnacle of success in the ED requires passion, energy, and often a radical transformation of the culture. When HealthStream Engagement Institute coaches work with ED leaders, such transformation begins by encouraging everyone in the department to unite in their commitment to the organization, its mission, and its vision. Everyone must commit to doing some things differently and to creating a culture that is aligned with the vision of the organization.

A typical ED's culture is "the way things are routinely done around here," so when leaders talk about changing a culture, they are essentially referring to changing behavior. As leaders and staff embark upon their journey to enhance their ED's performance, they will need to change some of their personal behaviors. In some cases, this will mean stopping some things they are currently doing. In other cases, it will require creating new habits. Often, accelerating a department's performance requires individuals to do some things they have always done but doing them in a different way. It is most effective to consider and gauge this level of commitment at the outset of a performance improvement journey.

# 2

## Develop Accountable Leaders

Effective leaders are facilitators of change, and these are the individuals that every ED relies upon to ensure the mission and vision of the organization are carried out appropriately. Passionate, qualified leaders are the foundation of every successful department and the first necessary element for achieving operational excellence in the ED. These leaders must be aligned in their goals and commitment to the organization, accountable to each other and to their team members, and well-trained to carry out the complex duties and tasks of their respective roles. Although titles vary greatly, leadership in the ED typically refers to several individuals, including the medical director, nursing director, nurse manager, and charge nurses. Ancillary and support leaders from lab, radiology, and registration should also be included in this group. The more inclusive and aligned this extended leadership team becomes, the more successful it will be in exceeding expectations.

To gauge the level of alignment among a leadership team, we consider the following questions as a leadership self-check:

- Is effective nursing leadership in place?
- Is effective physician leadership in place?
- Is there alignment between the two?
- Are there charge nurses in place on all shifts?
- Are the charge nurses aligned and committed?
- Are all leaders trained? To what degree? In what ways?
- Is there an overall ED strategy in place?
- Is there strong collaboration between the ED and ancillary departments?

Based on the answers to the self-check questions, the ED leadership team should consider the following HealthStream Engagement Institute proven tactics to improve alignment:

1. Ensure there is a trained charge nurse on all shifts to oversee ED operations.
2. Ensure that every charge nurse has the tools, resources, and education to do the job.
3. Institute weekly meetings with nursing and medical directors to review goals, monitor progress, and ensure ongoing development.
4. Begin leader rounding for the nursing and medical directors on patients and staff.
5. Ensure there is a team in place for solving problems.
6. Consider holding a one-day off-site strategy retreat for engaging leaders and setting manageable goals for the team.

Ensuring all members of the leadership team are well-trained and have the competencies to carry out the mission of the ED and organization is vital. When working with EDs, HealthStream Engagement Institute coaches spend a great deal of time guiding and supporting the leadership team as the foundation upon which additional achievements will build.

# 3

## Select and Retain an Engaged Group of Staff and Physicians

Once a solid and aligned leadership team is in place and a foundational patient-centered culture has been established, the focus shifts to include a full roster of engaged staff and physicians, providing care and service to patients and their families. As leaders, we often hear the term “engagement” or “engaged employee,” but what does it mean, how is it different than satisfaction, and why is it so important to an organization’s success? While many definitions exist, engagement can be considered “productive energy” that a leader or staff member demonstrates in the workplace. An engaged individual is someone who is involved, energetic, connected to the mission, and often exceeds job expectations. Someone who is disengaged does the opposite. They rarely exceed job expectations, perhaps lack focus or initiative, and sometimes simply clocks-in and give a minimal or standard job performance.

It is not secret that there are many disengaged employees in today’s workforce. The challenge, as we relate this fact to the ED, is its potential impact on every aspect of the department’s operation and outcomes. Imagine the experience a patient has when he or she is cared for by a group of disengaged clinicians. ED leaders must recognize the importance of having an engaged team in place. To gauge the level of engagement among teams, we consider the following questions as a self-check:

- Are all positions filled?
- Is the turnover rate acceptably low?
- Is everyone involved, committed, and interested?
- Is the team dominated by “owners” or “renters?”
- Is there a team in place to focus on staff issues?
- Are leaders connecting with staff regularly?
- Does everyone have input into the department?
- Are leaders monitoring the level of engagement?

Based on the answers to the self-check questions, the ED leadership team should consider the following proven HealthStream Engagement Institute proven tactics for enhancing engagement:

1. Invest time to hire the right individual for the right job.
2. Include behavioral-based questions into a solid peer interviewing process.
3. Ensure the ED nursing director or manager is rounding regularly on staff in order to build a trusting relationship with them, to ensure they have the tools and equipment to perform the job well, and to establish a method for touching base with them regularly.
4. Organize a discussion on staff satisfaction with the ED committee or shared governance process. A staff-driven team can enhance the level of engagement by identifying and addressing barriers or critical issues. This team can also plan and coordinate team building or extracurricular activities to boost teamwork and morale.
5. Implement a method for all staff to reward and recognize one another. Some teams create a formal method of recognizing strong performance.

Ensuring the entire team is engaged and committed has a powerful effect on ED performance. Strong leaders, a patient-centered culture, and highly engaged staff can then collaborate to address various challenges and goals of the ED.

# 4

## Commit to Patient-Centered Behaviors, Tactics, and Flow

Along the journey, hospital and ED leaders must remember that their entire effort and focus must revolve around patients and their families. Every initiative put in place and every element we attempt to optimize is done in an effort to create a patient-centered culture. In the quest to create a patient-centered culture, consider these questions as a self-check:

- Does the first impression of the ED suggest a welcoming, caring environment?
- Are staff and leaders committed to maintaining a patient-centered culture?
- Are service standards clearly established as non-negotiable behaviors?
- What tools and tactics have been put into place to improve the patient experience?
- Are leaders rounding on patients? Are staff members rounding on patients?
- Are whiteboards in place in every room and are they used regularly?
- Are patients kept informed about delays and issues with their care?
- Are the ED leaders familiar with the patient experience survey used and the questions patients are asked?

In the quest to improve the patient experience and to create a welcoming service culture, leaders must first commit to the notion that doing so is possible. We must challenge ourselves to put all cynicism aside, to set manageable goals, and to consider these HealthStream Engagement Institute proven tools and tactics:

1. Ensure a team is dedicated to satisfaction and service. This group might be part of an existing committee or shared leadership structure or may be freestanding.
2. Keep patients informed by incorporating hourly rounding and consistently using whiteboards.
3. Develop Words that Work™ for everyone in the ED to use when interacting with patients.
4. Create a process for calling patients by phone upon discharge to check on their condition.

In addition to ensuring a solid set of patient-centered tactics and behaviors are in place, leaders must also address flow and efficiency in the ED. It is impossible to separate service excellence from operational excellence, and the goals of every emergency department should include seeing patients promptly, treating them appropriately, and dispositioning them efficiently. To gauge the level of operational efficiency, we consider the following questions as a self-check:

- Has the team established clear throughput goals?
- Is the entire team committed to the same throughput goals?
- What does the current throughput model look like?
- Is the model achieving acceptable goals?
- How many steps are in the typical patient experience? Are any wasteful?
- How many times does a patient have to stand up and sit down?
- What are the barriers to creating an optimal flow model? Are they being addressed?
- Are all departments committed to efficient ED flow (i.e. lab, radiology, registration, etc.)?

While there is no simple answer or one-size-fits-all solution for flow, here are some HealthStream Engagement Institute proven principles to consider to enhance efficiency and reduce overall turnaround times:

1. Examine the ED and all of the steps in the flow process with a fresh set of eyes. Look at all of the steps in the process and determine whether or not each of them is necessary.
2. Remove (or reduce) any wasteful or unnecessary steps in the process.
3. Create a process that encourages individuals to do things in parallel (versus serial). For example, in some EDs, the RN and MD assess the patient together in a joint process.
4. Ensure that all positions (RN, MD, and Ancillary) are scheduled based on volume and acuity by hour-of-the-day, sometimes referred to as demand-capacity staffing.
5. Ensure there is a team focused on ED flow and a team focused on inpatient flow. Having these two teams aligned and united in their approach is ideal to create a push-pull model.
6. Ensure the triage process is shortened and streamlined as much as possible. A triage is a function (not a place) and is not always necessary. If the next patient that arrives is going to go to Room 3 regardless of his condition, conducting a triage does little to expedite the process.
7. Keep vertical patients vertical, and keep them moving. It is often a temptation to put everyone in a gown and have them lie down on a bed. This process is outdated and not necessary for every patient.

ED flow can become complicated, especially in large, busy, and urban departments. In many cases, bigger, more complex departments will require a deeper look into the operation and multiple factors affecting performance. Many hospitals have embraced Lean or Six Sigma methodologies as an option and have found success with such strategies for reducing overall turnaround times.



## **Execute, Measure, and Communicate the Plan**

A critical component of any successful change process includes a detailed and clearly written action plan. Leaders are much more likely to achieve their goals if their action steps are written. Leaders and team members can use the written plan as their roadmap and as one of the tools for tracking their success. Build into the plan specific elements that can be used as success measures to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the plan.

Another important aspect of having a written plan is ensuring that the components of the plan are communicated widely, using several methods of communication. Some studies have suggested that it takes individuals up to seven times to see or hear something before they change behavior. Mentioning something just once at a staff meeting or in an email is not enough. Create a comprehensive communication plan in which a new change or idea is shared in many venues such as during huddles, in an email, in a newsletter, during rounding, etc.



## Hardwire and Sustain Results

The final step in the HealthStream Engagement Institute approach is to ensure that all of the good work and habits that have been implemented in the department continue. A focused and concerted effort to hardwire specific actions into the department's daily routine is required. Build accountability systems into the process. Consider these questions to ensure results are sustained:

- Is the plan still working?
- Is it getting results?
- How will we sustain the results we have achieved?
- How will we continue to build momentum?
- How will new staff be oriented going forward?
- What is next for our team?

## Summary and Conclusion

The six points in the HealthStream Engagement Institute approach provide a framework for leaders to follow for creating their own roadmap. Sustainable success requires a persistent focus on results from genuine leaders who work consistently to transform an ED from its status quo to a results-based, high-performing department.



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HealthStream is a leading provider of workforce development and research solutions for providers throughout the continuum of care. We are dedicated to improving patient and resident outcomes through the development of healthcare organizations' greatest asset: their people—the professionals on the frontlines of care delivery every day.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Dr. Eric Heckerson has visited nearly 400 hospitals and medical groups across the country and enjoys collaborating with leaders at all levels to exceed their stated goals and outcomes. He has leveraged his education and experience to coach leaders and organizations to create new ED flow models, improve patient satisfaction scores to the 95th percentile, improve employee engagement scores by 50%, and reduce staff turnover rates at one facility from 39% to 9%. Heckerson has an Ed.D. in Leadership, an M.A. in Organizational Management, and a B.S. in Nursing. He is a Registered Nurse and Certified Facilitator in Lean for Healthcare Methodology.