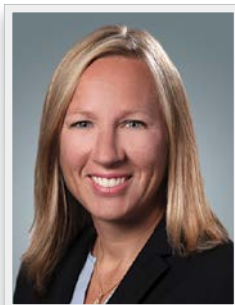


Systemness: The Path to High Reliability

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In a healthcare landscape ripe with mergers and acquisitions, consumerism, and non-traditional providers of care, continued success requires the ability to deliver value and compete in new and innovative ways. Our community and consumers expect our organizations to provide consistent, high-quality, and safe services. They also expect that we



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follow best-practice guidelines and excel at care coordination. This is what it means to be highly reliable for the people we serve.

At Spectrum Health, we strive to achieve high reliability in a complex health system. One of the key tenets for making this possible is “systemness”: cultural and structural integration that serves as the cornerstone for high reliability.

Systemness has become a buzzword yet it represents an important concept and philosophy. It is imperative to provide value to the communities we serve and achieve the quadruple aim—better health; lower cost; improved experience, including outcomes; and joy at work and provider fulfillment.

There are certain common attributes of systemness that high-achieving organizations share or aspire to: a clear definition of the organization’s identity and purpose; frictionless connections between people, physicians, caregivers, insurance providers, and health and wellness resources; and a focus on best practices and being highly reliable.

A Defining Moment

The pace of mergers and acquisitions in the healthcare industry has quickened over the past two decades. My own organization has significantly changed from a community hospital to a \$6 billion integrated health system with a robust health plan, a talented multi-specialty medical group, and award-winning hospitals and service sites.

Most health systems face a defining moment. Ours involved declaring we were “One System, One Focus, One Experience.” Previously, members of our system were proudly independent in their various locations and business units. To be

successful in the future, we needed to be proudly integrated as one system.

To achieve our goals of being one system, we launched three initiatives: implementing one electronic clinical and financial platform across the entire system, establishing a streamlined structure to promote communication and collaboration system-wide, and executing high-reliability best practices.

Creating Board Champions

To launch these initiatives, we first had to ensure we had the full understanding and support of the board. Because systemness often is a new concept for board members, we invested time during the past year to educate board members across our hospitals on the topic. Additionally, we established clear metrics and prepared the board to anticipate and take action related to industry changes and market forces.

As part of our ongoing education with board members, we conducted several symposiums related to the role of community hospital boards and identified board members’ top priorities as quality, community health, and philanthropy.

Last spring, the board symposium specifically focused on high reliability. Board members learned that high reliability involved quality and safety as well as reducing variation across all disciplines, such as process improvement, patient experience, and finance. They also came to understand the need for culture change and to prioritize this work.

Board members initiated discussions at their respective board meetings and quality committees about high reliability and how to shift the organizational culture. As board members and quality committees began to review and understand high-reliability organization (HRO) principles, they embraced the potential and were excited about the positive impact that systemness efforts could achieve. Board members have evolved to become champions of high reliability. They see the value in this work for our organization and the community, and are excited about our progress.



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Key Board Takeaways

Boards at health systems striving to achieve high reliability should take the following steps to ensure they are supporting efforts to create systemness:

- Become educated on systemness and identify board priorities for developing a high-reliability strategy.
- Be prepared to anticipate and take action related to industry changes and market forces.
- Ensure that the board recognizes the value for the organization and the community in striving to achieve high reliability.

A Common EHR Is the Beginning, Not the End

A single electronic clinical and financial platform for management and stewardship of all patient information is a building block toward systemness. Having one electronic health record systemwide is fundamental to removing technical barriers so we can deliver exceptional experiences and achieve the greatest level of coordination.

To begin the systemness effort, we implemented a consistent EHR throughout our 12 hospitals, 180 service sites, and 1,600-provider medical group. This multi-year effort has transformed care delivery at every location for every person.

Previously, extensive variation existed across our system, including 10 different EHRs, more than 1,200 order sets, eight processes for patient movement, 86 revenue-cycle add-ons for 38 vendors, and more than 20,000 setup protocols for surgery. As an integrated health system, we can create more value and ensure safer, higher-quality care when we have a tool that enables the different parts of our system to work in sync. For example, now we have approximately 400 order sets instead of 1,200, and 218 standard work documents. Systemness enables us to coordinate care for the optimal consumer experience and makes it more fulfilling to do our work.

Structural Alignment Paves the Way

A focus on structure is essential to ensure success and sustainability. As part of our systemness initiative, we are aligning both clinical and administrative functions across the enterprise to ensure we are improving quality and reducing cost. Spectrum Health’s rehabilitation department is

garnering superlative results as the first area to implement this alignment.

The project started by addressing span of control to achieve consistency and eliminate overlap. Managers in different sites were working in comparative silos, with different standards and expectations. Because patient demand wasn't spread across the system, productivity, efficiencies, and consumer convenience were suboptimized. As the initiative took hold, employees identified solutions to create consistent standards and expectations across all sites. The solutions included standardizing the branding and dress code to being very clear about job responsibilities and pay rates. Traditionally, these inconsistencies contributed to animosity and low morale among staff and low patient experience scores.

A well-developed leadership structure overseeing more than 10 sites and supervisors working side by side with therapists has led to less variation and more coordination of services. This effort resulted in significant improvement in operational metrics within 18 months of implementation at

each site. We have achieved the following results over the past five years:

- Productivity has risen by 21 percent.
- Growth increased by 28 percent.
- Patient experience improved by 7 percent.
- Team engagement increased by 77 percent.
- We achieved a cost savings of 18 percent or nearly \$600,000.

Culture Change Drives High-Reliability Behavior

To be highly reliable, we must implement the principles and best practices across our system. These practices are embedded in our quality and safety work, as well as our culture. We launched an initiative called "At Our Best," which set expectations for employees to be curious, ask the next question, and participate in finding solutions. Our people are vital to making this transformation a reality. We are people caring for people—our colleagues as well as the people we serve. Our employees must be enabled and empowered to be at their best, providing high-quality, safe care every day. A culture of high reliability is the imperative

to deliver the value proposition we have promised to our communities.

Conclusion

Many of us work for multifaceted organizations comprising delivery systems, medical groups, insurance carriers, and the entire continuum of care from prenatal to hospice. Layers of complexity make high reliability a challenge.

But, it is possible to be highly reliable. By achieving systemness, the principles of high reliability become central to operational effectiveness and excellence. Functioning as a true system differentiates organizations and enables long-term sustainability. The first step begins with the courage and conviction to declare it as a goal—to be one system focused on delivering the exceptional, affordable, and highly reliable services our communities deserve. ●

The Governance Institute thanks Christina M. Freese Decker, FACHE, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Spectrum Health in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for contributing this article. She can be reached at Christina.Freese@spectrumhealth.org.