

# Building Cultures of Safety—Together

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**K**eeping patients safe from harm has always been and remains a key priority for healthcare organizations, their leadership, and their boards. While much has been achieved to improve safety, preventable medical errors continue to occur at hospitals and health systems in alarming numbers. Though not an official cause of death in the U.S., if it were, medical errors would rank third, according to a 2016 study by Johns Hopkins Medicine. Clearly there is room for improvement, and healthcare boards play a vital role in this quest.

As healthcare organizations strive to achieve the ultimate goal of zero harm, CEOs and board members—together—should address patient safety. Senior leadership and healthcare boards must collaborate to cultivate and sustain cultures of safety throughout their organizations.

Improving healthcare safety requires leaders who are committed and take a stand to achieve the highest standards of safety. Strong leadership involves balancing core values while consistently raising the bar for excellence. The American College of Healthcare Executive's leadership development expertise, coupled with the Institute for Healthcare Improvement and the National Patient Safety Foundation Lucian Leape Institute, offers healthcare leaders the foundational tools to measure, build, and sustain a culture of safety in the workplace.

This article explores key areas healthcare boards can focus on in conjunction with senior leadership to help make safety an unrelenting priority within the institutions they govern.

## Establish Safety as a Strategic Priority

Accountability for safety is shared jointly between CEOs and boards, with both charged with establishing a culture of safety within the organization. In addition to providing oversight of safety efforts, board members and senior leadership must communicate clearly to staff and patients that safety is a core organizational value.

One way to achieve this is by including safety among an organization's

strategic priorities. In addition to having well-thought-out safety goals, board members and senior leadership should discuss and consider formally listing safety in organizational mission and vision statements. Doing so can further stress the importance of safety to staff, patients, and the community.

An important first step in including safety in the organizational vision or mission is conducting a thorough assessment of the organization's current safety landscape. Board members, working with senior administrative and clinical leadership, can review safety-related areas such as:

- Current safety practices
- Safety metrics
- Clinician attitudes and perceptions
- Patient and family member experiences
- External trends or events affecting the healthcare field and safety efforts

Using information gleaned from this analysis can aid senior leadership and boards in developing an organizational vision or mission that includes safety as a core value.

## Strive for Transparency

Board members, along with senior leadership, are responsible for ensuring a mechanism is in place for reporting and recording organizational safety metrics and issues. In addition to having a thorough understanding of how safety measures and harm events are reported out to the community and internally among staff members, board members share responsibility for continued safety transparency.

To that end, board members can ensure quality data is readily available to patients and the community on the organization's Web site and in public places throughout hospitals and other healthcare facilities. Boards and leadership also can consider engaging patients and their families in shared decision making regarding safety goals and initiatives. All of these steps go a long way toward establishing trust among

## Key Board Takeaways

As organizations continue to strive toward achieving the ultimate goal of zero harm, board members and CEOs need to work—together—to address patient safety. Some key actions they can take include:

- Mentioning safety in organizational mission and vision statements
- Encouraging transparency by making quality data readily available to patients and community members online and in public places throughout healthcare facilities
- Engaging patients and their families in shared decision making regarding safety goals and initiatives
- Reviewing patient stories about safety at every board meeting
- Incorporating a section about safety into board self-assessments
- Including board members on quality and safety committees
- Taking the "We Lead for Safety" pledge

the board, senior leadership, staff, and the community.

## Think Beyond Metrics

Board members are responsible for reviewing patient safety data such as metrics during board meetings. A streamlined approach is best, in which harm events per 1,000 patient days, adverse events per 100 admissions, and percent admissions with an adverse event are measured. The Institute for Healthcare Improvement's Global Trigger Tool is one resource to consider to measure overall harm in a system.<sup>1</sup> For a foundational understanding of concepts, another resource is the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Though safety metrics should remain a standing item on board meeting agendas, directors should consider taking a step beyond looking at metrics and include patient stories in their safety discussions.

Hearing about patients' safety experiences, whether they are positive or negative, puts a human face on safety's importance and may even spark new ideas for organizational initiatives and priorities. One practice to consider is reviewing the number and names of all patients and staff who experienced harm

<sup>1</sup> See <http://bit.ly/2JRQuAj>.

of any sort in the organization since the previous board meeting. Overall, boards should spend at least as much time discussing safety and quality at board meetings as they do reviewing financials.

Board members should also consider joining organizational quality and safety committees to further their knowledge and oversight of related initiatives. In addition, participating in quality, safety, and culture-related events, such as those held during Patient Safety Awareness Week, is a great way for directors to publicly demonstrate their support for safety.

### Focus on Knowledge

An engaged and educated healthcare board is an effective healthcare board. In addition to reviewing safety metrics at every board meeting, board members should consider accompanying CEOs on executive rounding to gain a better understanding of the organization's safety culture and to communicate and support the organization's safety agenda.

Boards also may want to include a section devoted to safety on their board and individual self-assessments to test knowledge and understanding

of safety and to identify educational opportunities. Finally, board members should regularly review safety science and culture-related news and research, focusing on areas such as systems engineering and just culture.

Safety must be a chief factor in how healthcare boards make decisions. Continually learning about safety will go a long way toward ensuring the commitment to a culture of safety is an utmost priority for the organization.

### Tools for the Journey

Patient safety can be addressed most effectively through a dedicated, persistent organizational focus and with senior leadership and board members working together. To help frame their continued work in this critical area, the American College of Healthcare Executives and the IHI/NPSF Lucian Leape Institute, in partnership with several renowned healthcare organizations and safety and leadership experts, developed *Leading a Culture of Safety: A Blueprint for Success*.<sup>2</sup> This important resource provides healthcare organizations the research, tools, and strategies they need to make marked progress toward zero harm.

In addition, ACHE is encouraging all healthcare leaders to take a pledge to commit to creating a culture of safety, assessing their current safety measures, and implementing a set of steps to help advance their organization's journey toward safety. Board members can consider taking the "We Lead for Safety" pledge alongside their organizational senior leadership to further underscore safety efforts. Both the blueprint and information about taking the safety pledge can be found at [ache.org/safety](http://ache.org/safety).

When boards are knowledgeable about and champion safety within their organizations, the focus on safety flows down to senior leadership and cascades throughout all levels of an organization. Working together, healthcare boards and senior leadership can move the needle farther toward achieving zero harm within their organizations. ●

*The Governance Institute thanks Deborah J. Bowen, FACHE, CAE, President and CEO of the American College of Healthcare Executives, for contributing this article. She can be reached at [dbowen@ache.org](mailto:dbowen@ache.org).*

<sup>2</sup> American College of Healthcare Executives, IHI/NPSF Lucian Leape Institute, *Leading a Culture of Safety: A Blueprint for Success*, 2017 (available at <http://bit.ly/2zGZEWL>).