

High-Touch in a High-Tech Healthcare World: Lead the Way Forward with a Human-Centered Approach

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Remaining “high-touch” in the evolving and reactionary world of high-tech healthcare, workforce shifts, and fluctuating patient acuties requires an equally creative solution.

Human-Centered Leadership in Healthcare (HCL-HC) fills the gap in healthcare’s enduring use of borrowed and non-healthcare-specific approaches to leadership. In contrast to traditional, transactional, or “the way we have always done it” ways of leading, human-centered leadership brings forth a relational style aligned with complexity, caring, and systems theory. If the pandemic has shown the healthcare world anything, it is that leadership must have a balanced focus between metrics and recognizing the humanity and health of each team member. Hospital executives and boards can set expectations for patient experience, zero harm, and decreased length of stay, but without a healthy team and work environment, these metrics will persistently fall short.

Our team is actively working to demonstrate that the essential skills to achieve highly prized metrics are the skills of relational leadership. HCL-HC provides a method for leadership that harnesses the power of the shared human experience. This style of leadership is based in research with actionable and structured tactics to guide leaders in:¹

- Modeling self-care, self-awareness, mindfulness, and well-being.
- Emanating energy outward to their teams through making connections, empowering the workforce, and recognizing the humanity in others.
- The result is a culture of excellence, trust, and caring.

1 Kay Kennedy, Lucy Leclerc, and Susan Campis, *Human-Centered Leadership in Healthcare: Evolution of a Revolution*, Morgan James, New York, 2021; Lucy Leclerc, Kay Kennedy, and Susan Campis, “Human-Centered Leadership in Healthcare: A Contemporary Nursing Leadership Theory Generated via Constructivist Grounded Theory,” *Journal of Nursing Management*, Vol. 29, Issue 2, March 2021.

This article shares exemplars and real-world results of how human-centered leadership, when implemented as a long-term solution and way of being, positively integrates high-touch in our high-tech world. The shared human experience translates to the patient experience. If we start by facilitating a shared human experience between our leaders and our teams, the cascading effect on patients and communities follows.

How to Be a High-Touch Leader

Virtual this, virtual that. Even before the pandemic, technology was seeping its way into almost every part of our lives. Healthcare was pacing with the rest of the world, but the pandemic pushed us into warp speed and turned traditional face-to-face interactions into Web-mediated patient visits with providers, family visits with acute-care patients, remote work, and an onslaught of applications and patient portals to serve these seismic shifts. Nurses and providers felt the heaviness of losing the ability to hold a patient's hand. Patients longed to be on the receiving end of a compassionate human interaction. Many hoped and longed for a return to "normal." That clearly didn't happen and as we venture forward in a peri-pandemic world, a reckoning of sorts is happening. How do we lead the way forward ensuring we share the human experience with our patients and employees? Now, more than ever, we need to retain both! Below we explore four ways to be high-touch in a high-tech world.

1. It Starts with You

Unfortunately, healthcare leaders are known for their mythical ability to work 90 hours a week, forgoing sleep, exercise, family time, relationships, and spiritual connections. Is this a sustainable way of being? What message does this send to the teams you lead? Does it give your team permission for self-care if they see you not caring for yourself? Persistent data and evidence over the past few peri-pandemic years show burnout and stress as two of the most significant reasons for staff and leaders to leave their role, and perhaps their profession.² Why, in an industry designed to care for humans' health and well-being, do we do such a poor job of modeling the way?

2 American Organization of Nurse Leaders (AONL), "[AONL COVID-19 Longitudinal Study, August 2021 Report: Nurse Leaders' Top Challenges, Emotional Health, and Areas of Needed Support, July 2020 to August 2021](#)"; Chaunie Brusie, "[Survey of Healthcare Workers Reveals High Levels of Burnout, Stress, and Thoughts of Leaving Their Jobs](#)," Berxi, June 14, 2022.

Think about the heart. During the first part of the heartbeat, the heart fills itself with blood, oxygen, and nutrients. The second part sends blood, oxygen, and nutrients out to the rest of the body. If the heart doesn't get what it needs to function, the rest of the body will not be able to function. The first and most basic way to illustrate a human-centered, high-touch approach to your team and to your patients is to model the way in regard to self-care. If the leader prioritizes harmony between work and self-care, while expecting the same from staff, this gives the team permission to fill their proverbial cup first. As a leader, my mantra was to be sure each person on my team knew that I and the organization supported them in being sure that they and their family's needs were addressed first so that when they showed up for work, their minds were "in the game."

→ Key Board Takeaways

Boards should help set a culture of human-centered leadership from the top and encourage management to:

- Practice self-care, self-compassion, and self-awareness as a role model for their teams.
- Support their teams with respect, kindness, empathy, and empowerment.
- Create forums (e.g., councils or committees) where employees and patients can share new ideas and contribute to organizational innovation.
- Unify their teams around a shared vision and mission.
- Recognize the connection between employee and patient experience—happy employees will take better care of patients.

2. Be a Connector

A central part of the human experience is the ability to connect, network, and develop relationships. Human-centered leaders seek to create unity in the community. To do that, we need to shift from a top-down to an inward-outward approach. Shared decision making (you may know it as shared governance) is not just for healthcare teams—it can and should include patients and families as well.

First, consider shared decision making as an invisible architecture for your organization. Imagine a way of being in which the employees are empowered to not only identify the problems, but also the solutions. As a leader, I know I don't have

all the answers but those who are knee-deep in the work do. When leaders create a psychologically safe space, team members not only offer the solutions, but they also own them.

Second, shift from a paternalistic view to a patient-centered view of the world. Build an advisory council comprised of patients, families, and community members. Do a “tracer” with a patient and their family from the time they arrive in your parking lot. You might realize a lot of small wins to improve the way patients feel welcomed and “touched” as they move through your organization.

3. Empower the Workforce

Leading with the intention to help your team members and patients be the best version of themselves is a primary goal of leaders at any level of the organization. As we adjust to our Web-based ways of being, consider how you can uncover innovative ideas from within your teams that harness the human touch in the high-tech world. For example, a number of organizations around the country are taking ideas from their nurses to create roles such as the Virtual Nurse Mentor. The idea is to pair experienced nurses with newly licensed registered nurses (NLRN), but the catch is that mentors are connecting with their mentees using technology. The Virtual Nurse Mentors receive training in a relational leadership approach such as HCL-HC and apply the lessons learned in their virtual meetings with the NLRNs. The idea is to foster retention while nurturing the NLRN as they transition into a peri-pandemic healthcare setting.

4. Recognize Humanity in Others

We believe that recognizing the humanity in ourselves and others makes us JEDIs. Yes, we said JEDI. Just like the knights in Star Wars who are trained to guard peace and justice, so too are human-centered leaders champions of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI).³ The shared human experience with patients and staff starts with the basic and quite simple approach to be mindful of how we are simultaneously very different, yet the same. This is another opportunity to harness your inner architect to create a structure as strong and robust as the steel beams holding up your physical building.

3 For more information on the role of the board and senior leadership in integrating JEDI efforts into the strategic plan and organizational culture, see The Governance Institute’s Webinar, Somava Saha, “[How to Become a JEDI: A Strategic Approach to Creating a Diverse, Thriving, & Just Organization](#),” September 2022.

Consider integrating JEDI into your values but not just as a marketing ploy to check the box. For example, what if your organization began a journey to become a LGBTQ-friendly hospital. There are currently more than 250 healthcare facilities designated as “Leaders in LGBTQ+ Healthcare Quality.”⁴ Maybe the first step is to do an assessment of your organization. Perhaps your shared governance councils can tackle this alongside the most people-focused department in your hospital, Human Resources.

Human-Centered Leadership in Healthcare is a structured approach, a philosophy, a theory, and a way of being. Healthcare boards can model this style of leadership and support senior leaders and management in creating a human-centered culture. It’s an idea that’s time has come.

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4 Human Rights Campaign, “[Healthcare Equality Index 2022: Promoting Equitable and Inclusive Care for LGBTQ+ Patients and Their Families.](#)”