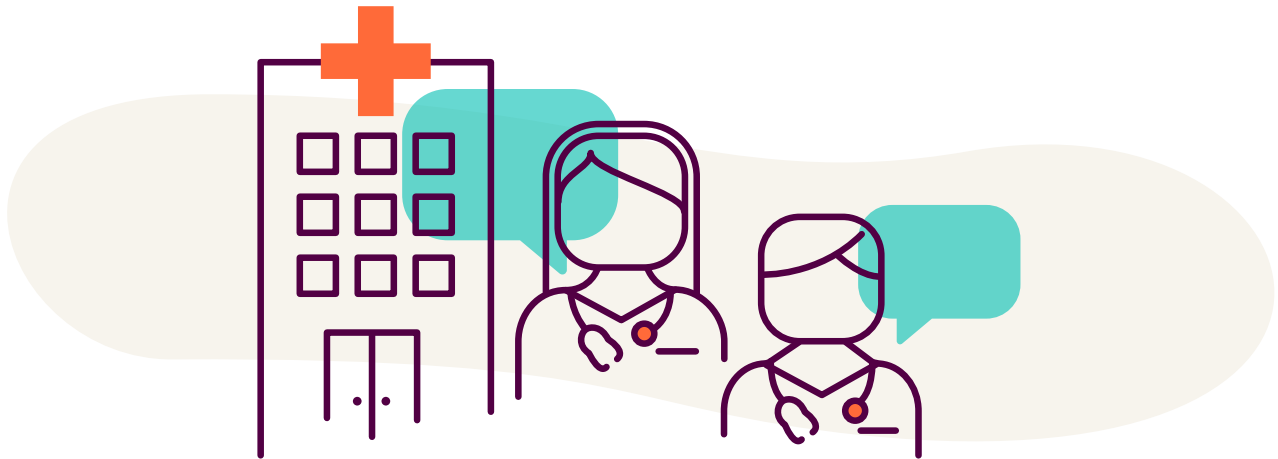


Emergency Department  
Culture Change Improves  
Care Quality, Efficiency,  
and Provider Retention:  
**Here's How.**



## **Culture:**

# The Cure for What Ails Your Emergency Department

The challenges of health care and hospital management are constant and inevitable. The emergency department is no different. The challenges, whether they are recruitment, leadership, patient satisfaction scores, or community perception, will vary from facility to facility and may even vary from month to month within each facility. Despite the range of issues emergency departments encounter, there are measures you can take to prepare your emergency department team to overcome them. The best place to start is to ensure your team has a strong culture. A stable emergency department culture with strong leadership and clearly defined goals is well prepared for the inevitable ebbs and flows.



## What is Emergency Department Culture, and Why is it so Important?

In this white paper, we focus on the foundational elements required to establish a strong emergency department culture. Whether you are aware of it or not, your emergency department already has a unique subculture within your organization. It may be positive and harmonious, or it may have some dysfunction. Your emergency department's culture is the sum of its leadership, core values, attitudes, and behaviors, and it is influenced by the environment your team works in each day, the way they communicate with each person they interact with, and how engaged and personally invested they are in the success of the emergency department and hospital.

Perhaps the concept of "culture change" seems insubstantial. Maybe you think of positive culture as a nice-to-have element of any workplace that is secondary to your top priorities delivering efficient, cost-effective, high quality care. This white paper outlines why that order of priorities is flawed, because, in fact, a strong organizational culture is the concrete foundation upon which all lasting performance improvement builds. This philosophy is increasingly embraced across industries and promoted in bestselling books such as Simon Sinek's *Start with Why*. Healthcare is a prime place to put this philosophy to work to improve people's lives and boost the success of hospitals and health systems. When you prioritize culture, you see a tangible increase in not only patient and clinician

satisfaction, but also quality and efficiency metrics across the board.

Though emergency department culture impacts every aspect of department performance, from patient satisfaction scores to operational efficiency, it is most influential on provider satisfaction. Satisfied providers are crucial to operating a stable, effective emergency department and reducing provider turnover. As we face an industry-wide provider shortage of nearly 100,000 doctors by 2030<sup>1</sup> provider turnover is a pressing concern. Furthermore, provider satisfaction has a direct impact on burnout rates. Of the physicians working today, 46% overtly identified as feeling burnout in 2015 (up from 40% in 2013<sup>2</sup>). This high demand increases physician mobility



and empowers burnt out providers to leave negative work environments. Emergency departments with an unsatisfactory culture can incur costs of \$50,000-\$600,000<sup>3</sup> in recruiting, relocation, and lost productivity for each physician FTE.

The positive impact of increasing provider satisfaction doesn't stop at avoiding the cost of replacing a valuable provider. Satisfied providers have a ripple effect that touches every meaningful aspect of emergency department success, from community perception and patient experience to patient transitions of care and overall care quality.

Every objective you strive to achieve and every challenge you face is impacted in one way or another by culture. The key is to equip your most influential culture change champion,

your emergency department medical director, with the tools needed to develop a renowned culture in your emergency department.

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In the following pages, we'll outline key ways to cultivate an emergency department culture that clinicians will want to be a part of that in turn will drive improvements in quality, efficiency, and provider retention metrics, including:

- Developing medical leadership
- Aligning priorities, mindset, and goals



## The Key to Culture Change: Medical Leadership

A medical director who understands both the daily realities of clinical work and the operational and financial realities your hospital faces is critical to the effective development of your emergency department. Your medical director's leadership sets the tone for the entire department.

Asking emergency department leadership to identify, acknowledge, and address culture with transformative

action is not a small request. It may be the most challenging duty your medical director performs. It is critical that



clinical leaders earn the trust of the team to lead them away from “that’s the way we’ve always done it” toward “how can we do better?”

Effectively leading a group through change is not taught in medical school. But it is possible to find a medical director with culture change experience or develop your current medical director to lead your emergency department through transformative change and away from transactional leadership. Key traits to look for in a medical director leading a culture change include:

#### **Ability to establish trust**

All effective leaders establish trust. Each leader must build trust in a way that fits their leadership style. The unwavering trust of his/her team and peers in other departments is essential to a medical director’s success changing department culture. If your emergency department leadership isn’t trusted, you must resolve that issue with coaching, mentoring, or a leadership change before your department can take on a culture change.

Some signs to look for if you’re evaluating whether a current leader has a good trust foundation are: humility, ability to lead by example (not word alone), and willingness to defer credit to team members rather than taking credit themselves. Other good signs a trusted leader is in place are positive and

constructive interactions even through conflict, aligned team goals, and two-way communication on daily tasks and long-term accomplishments.

#### **Servant leadership mindset**

Leaders who will truly create culture change are leaders who leave their title and ego at the door. The strongest leaders model the behavior needed from their team by working alongside the team in the trenches, respecting every person they interact with as their equal, and prioritizing serving the team rather than viewing the team as working for them.

#### **Openness to feedback**

Strong leaders — especially leaders who thrive through change — are transparent with their team members and expect that their team members be transparent with them in return. This includes sharing both positive and negative feedback, and not only hearing it, but also acting on that feedback.

#### **View challenges as opportunities**

Negativity is the enemy of positive growth. Ensure your medical director’s default response to a challenge is to learn more about why things are the way they are and to think creatively about how to turn the challenge on its head and leverage it as an opportunity.



## Aligning Priorities, Mindset, and Goals

Once you have a leader in place who is innovative, open, positive, and a natural servant leader, the true work of transforming your emergency department can begin.

As the front door of your hospital, accounting for more than half of hospital admissions<sup>4</sup>, your emergency department culture often sets the stage for a patient's entire experience. Making a positive first impression and setting the tone to elevate department performance requires that your emergency

department goals and vision are aligned with your hospital or health system's goals and vision. This means that hospital leaders, emergency department leadership, clinicians, staff, and key interfaces with the emergency department share mutual goals and a vision for how patient care will be handled in the emergency department and throughout the continuum of care.

## Talk face to face with stakeholders

Before working to change the department culture, it's crucial that your leader(s) begin by understanding the current culture, identify challenges and opportunities for improvement, and make plans to ensure the emergency department team is united and headed in a direction that mutually benefits the emergency department team, the hospital and health system, and the patients and community you serve.

The first step in assessing practice challenges and opportunities is speaking with all stakeholders. This includes:

- Hospital administration
- Hospital leaders and community providers who interface with the emergency department
- Physicians and APPs
- Nurses and Technicians

When speaking with hospital leaders, emergency department leaders, and key interfaces with the emergency department the most important priority should be to clearly understand the vision, needs, and goals of each party. How does/can the emergency department contribute to achieving those goals and meeting those needs?

When speaking with clinical team members and staff, an effective way



to assess organizational culture challenges is to ask physicians, advanced practice providers, nurses,

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*The simple act of asking each individual for their input helps to promote a culture where the team feels valued.*

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techs, and other staff who work in the emergency department these simple questions:

- What do you love most about your job?
- What would you change that would make coming into work each day a more positive experience?

A collective review of answers to these questions can illuminate core strengths and weaknesses of department culture. The simple act of asking each individual for their input helps to promote a culture where the team feels valued. It also equips the medical director with the information necessary to prioritize

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which workflows, processes, and training need to be improved to promote safer, more cost-effective, efficient patient care and a more satisfied staff.

At the close of this exercise, the medical director should have a full understanding of:

- Community perception
- The abilities of the current clinical staff
- What is important to each stakeholder and are priorities aligned?
- Physician turnover, how often are providers leaving and why?
- Physician relations with APPs, nursing staff, and techs
- What defines success?
- What is the general attitude among staff?
- Does the clinical staff feel supported?
- Does the clinical staff feel invested?
- What are the primary communication issues within the department?
- Where does efficiency/throughout break down? Why?



## Communicate a new vision

Your medical director will not succeed in implementing culture change without clearly and consistently communicating and demonstrating what success looks like, the overall vision for the program, and how the department is progressing toward achieving its goals. Consistent open and positive communication and instituting change is challenging in any health care setting. It can be especially challenging in an emergency department because it is a fast-paced and frequently high-stress, high-stakes world. But, if positive, frequent, and constructive communication isn't prioritized, the emergency department is an environment that is ripe for the possibility of misunderstandings, compromised patient safety, decreased patient and clinician satisfaction<sup>5</sup>.

Because of growing consolidation in health care, a transactional, corporate management approach is becoming more and more common among emergency departments nationwide. This often breeds apathy among physicians and clinician team members as they begin to feel more like an anonymous number than an influential member of the team. The key to overcoming this breed of apathy is to inspire all stakeholders to share values and to be personally invested in achieving the positive outcomes of change. That requires taking a more hands-on, culture-focused approach to managing your emergency department. It also means engendering a sense of ownership among your physician group and comradery and solidarity among your entire emergency department staff and clinical team.

Encouraging investment and creating alignment starts with establishing shared values and illustrating the benefits of embracing those values. Instituting a new normal can inspire resistance, but it is not impenetrable. Leaders who have attempted to institute change in the past may recognize these responses:

- "We tried that before 10 years ago and it didn't work."
- "We could do that but it's not in our budget"
- "That won't work here because:  
We don't have enough staff / We are too busy / Our patients are too sick / Our patients do not understand the complexities of health care / We have to take it to committee, admin, etc...."





A facility that truly wants positive culture change and the physician retention and performance metric boosts that come along with it need to remove these statements from their language. To foster healthy emergency department culture that encourages positive communication, we recommend adopting the following philosophies:

**We are owners, not renters.**

If you want providers to feel invested in your hospital’s goals and fulfilled in their practice, you must empower them to take ownership of their practice. This requires engaging them in formal and informal meetings, seeking and implementing their feedback, and rewarding their accomplishments.

**We are here to serve.**

Creating a culture of true mutuality depends on establishing a culture of lateral service. Of course, this includes prioritizing the improvement of service provided to patients. But it extends to the service of colleagues, staff, and other disciplines. It requires taking a respectful, kind, and open approach to every interaction, every day. It also transcends title or rank. A physician and tech should feel equally comfortable approaching a physician or medical director with feedback or a question.

**We are accountable.**

Leaders should encourage all emergency department team

members to consider developing creative solutions to address issues and weaknesses rather than shifting blame or accepting the status quo. That means eliminating the “don’t say” phrases listed below by taking responsibility and offering a constructive solution:

Don’t Say:	Do Say:
I can’t do that. It’s not our policy.	Let me see what I can do.
That’s not my job.	How can I help?
That’s not my patient.	Let me find someone who can help.
It’s too crazy out there today!	Let’s do this!

**We are positive and respectful.**

A large part of an emergency department clinician’s job is to communicate. They communicate with other members of the medical staff, the nursing team, community physicians, other clinical disciplines, and with patients and their families. Positive and respectful communication is critically important because it directly impacts patient experience and quality of patient care. In general, improved efficiency, quality, and practice culture starts with better face-to-face



communication at every interaction, from patient check-in, to patient hand-off, to admission, discharge, or transfer.

**Positivity breeds more positivity.**

Positive communication not only makes it difficult to have a negative interaction with a patient, but also improves patient self-disclosure, compliance, recall and understanding of information. Your medical director should be empowered to not only develop communication standards within the physician group, but also make efforts to improve communication with patients and patient families, other specialties, nursing ancillary services, and administration.

**We are innovative and invested.**

The definition of insanity applies here: you cannot keep doing the same thing over and over and expect different results. Your emergency department must evolve to succeed. A growing population, increasing shortage of providers, advancing technology, and changing regulations — among other factors — all demand that health care facilities rethink their approach to thrive in the modern health care landscape.

Part of innovating for the future is considering the department's impact on the entire continuum of care. Without the trust of the nursing staff, hospital executives, and community primary care providers, patient flow

will break down and inefficiencies will surface. Effective strategies to foster a culture of positive interdisciplinary collaboration include:

- Scheduling monthly meetings between emergency department and hospital leaders to ensure goals are aligned and barriers are removed.
- Developing detailed transfer protocols with nursing staff and other disciplines that take into account the needs of all involved.
- Increasing input from all staff on the front lines from clerks and techs to APPs and physicians in monthly multidisciplinary meetings and regular opportunities for staff to provide feedback for the medical director and providers such as anonymous surveys/evaluations.
- Personal medical director outreach to community PCPs to build care pathways that work well given each practice's unique needs.
- Increased multidisciplinary participation in regular meetings that have a clearly stated purpose, agenda, follow-up plan, and concrete method for measuring progress toward short and long-term goals.
- Regular education opportunities and peer review opportunities for providers.



## Summary

Emergency department culture is the single most influential factor on your emergency department performance.

Culture impacts any number of emergency department challenges, ranging from nursing-physician staff conflict and dysfunctional team dynamics to high turnover, poor patient experience, operational inefficiency, and negative community

reputation. By developing your medical director to embrace positive, service-driven core values, attitudes, and behaviors, and engaging your clinical team in embracing this philosophy as well, you can lay the foundation for transformative, performance-impacting change in your emergency department.

Investing in department culture change can pay dividends for years to come in reduced provider turnover costs due to increased provider satisfaction, increased efficiency due to improved interdisciplinary relations, and more satisfied patients due to kind, respectful interactions and smoother patient transitions. Without a strong program culture, any performance-

boosting processes or workflows will stand on a broken foundation. By building the cultural foundation first, you set the tone for lasting, tangible increases in patient and clinician satisfaction, positive community reputation, and quality and efficiency performance improvements across the board.

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1. [https://www.aamc.org/newsroom/newsreleases/458074/2016\\_workforce\\_projections\\_04052016.html](https://www.aamc.org/newsroom/newsreleases/458074/2016_workforce_projections_04052016.html)
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  5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4678128/>

*This white paper, and the strategies and solutions contained herein, come courtesy of CareCulture Health Partners. CareCulture is an emergency and hospital medicine management services company that serves healthcare facilities across the United States. We transform each practice we serve through fundamental culture change. Our founders are experienced clinicians who have worked together in a variety of clinical environments. We have united because we firmly believe—and our methods prove—that healthcare doesn't have to be transactional. By creating a network of like-minded clinician groups across the country, we aim to change healthcare for the better, one program at a time.*



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