

SAFETY CULTURE TRENDS

The COVID-19 pandemic has driven across-the-board declines in safety culture. But implementing key high reliability strategies will help organizations bounce back stronger and more resilient than ever.

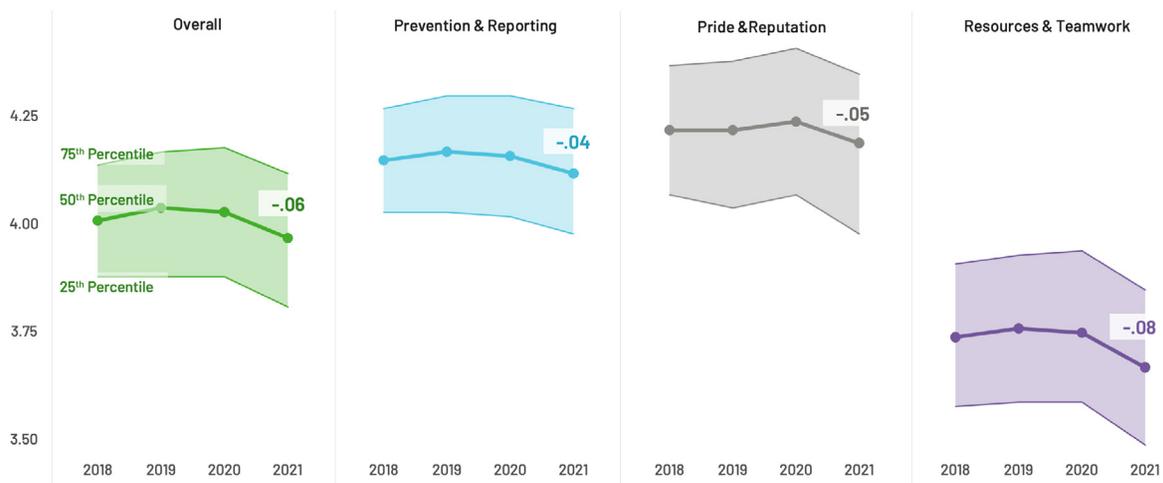


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Creating a true culture of safety is foundational to achieving our goal of zero harm, and it’s strongly correlated with safety [outcomes](#). But the pandemic has really put safety culture to the test.

In 2021, Press Ganey published a [report](#) showing that safety culture declined between 2019 and 2020 with the onset of the pandemic. An updated analysis indicates that safety culture has continued to decline in 2021 in all domains, particularly Resources and Teamwork (Figure 1). These reductions are prevalent across the board—and we’re not seeing strong performers sustain or improve, but rather, we’re witnessing a drop in performance.

Figure 1: Safety Culture Yearly Trends



To provide context, these declines in safety culture led to substantial drops in percentile ranking (Figure 2). For example, dropping Overall Safety Culture by 0.06 points would be associated with an 11-point decrease in overall percentile ranking, when using the same benchmark. Therefore, an organization at the 50th percentile would drop to the 39th percentile with a 0.06 reduction in Overall Safety Culture score.

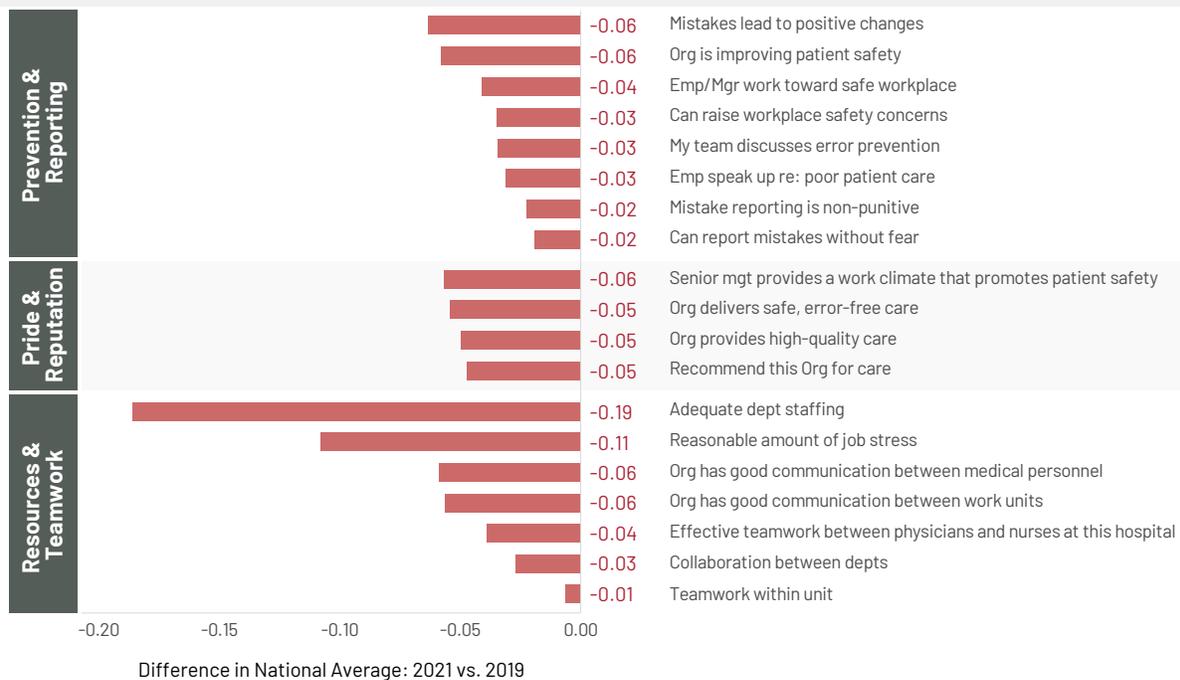
Figure 2: Impact of Trend on Percentile Rankings

FOR A FACILITY STARTING AT THE 50 TH PERCENTILE ...			
	AND DROPPING...	NEW PERCENTILE RANK	RANK CHANGE
Overall	-0.06	39 th	-11
Prevention & Reporting	-0.04	38 th	-12
Pride & Reputation	-0.05	43 rd	-7
Resources & Teamwork	-0.08	41 st	-9



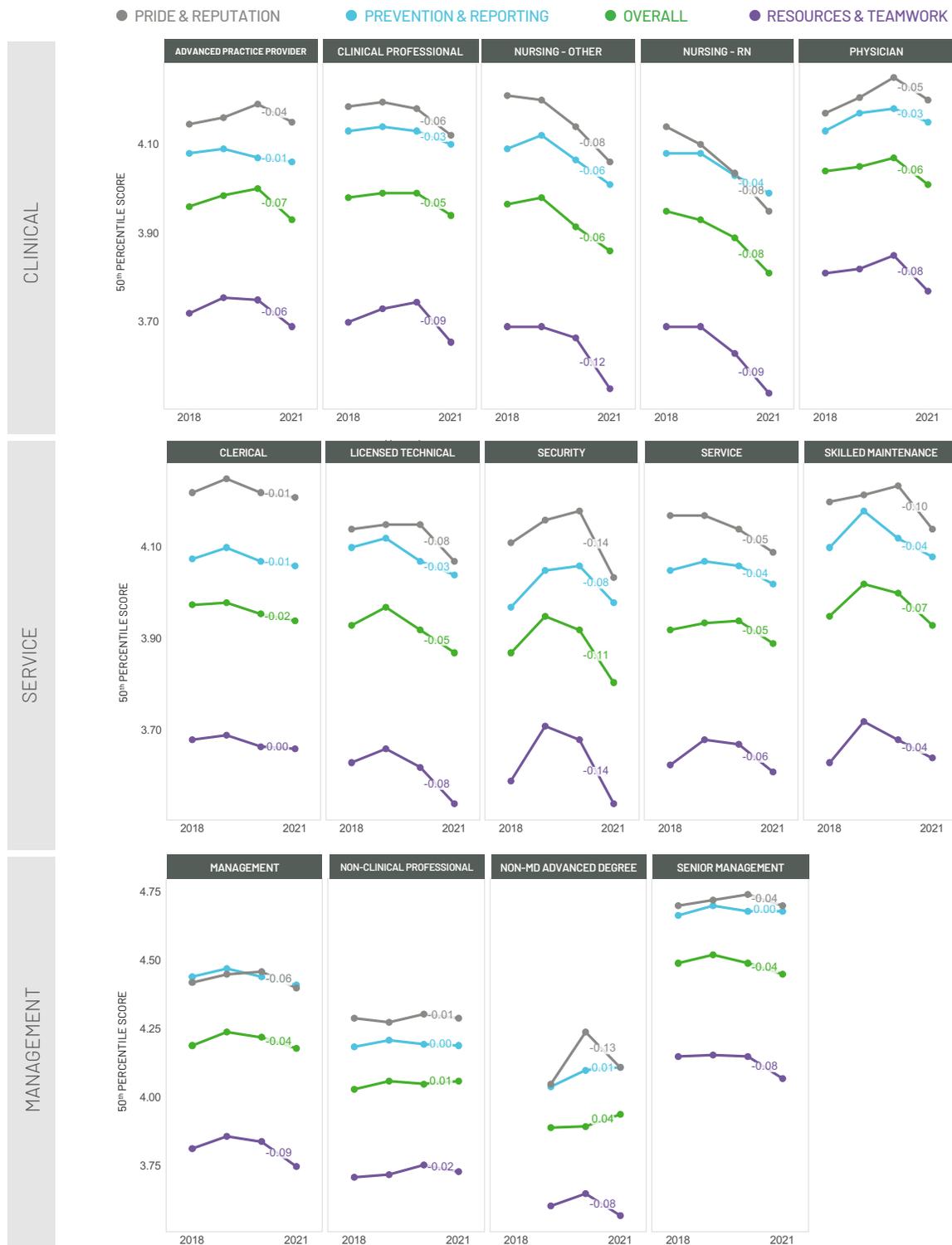
When comparing 2021 to pre-pandemic (2019) performance, all individual survey items saw performance declines, with the largest in adequate department staffing and reasonable job stress (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Item-Level Trending



By job type, all clinical and nonclinical roles saw reductions in perceptions of safety culture (Figure 4). Even those in management roles—traditionally higher performers—saw their scores drop.

Figure 4: Yearly Trending By Job Category



DISCUSSION

COVID-19 has amplified the already high-pressure environment for healthcare organizations—and safety culture outcomes suffered as a result. As healthcare cautiously moves out of crisis mode, reinvigorating safety culture should be top of mind at health systems to yield the best possible outcomes for patients and [caregivers](#)¹, especially as we have seen [worsening safety outcomes](#) over the past two years.

Fortunately, hospital leaders can begin to reverse the downward trend in safety culture and drive improvement efforts forward. Leaders can measure progress through a combination of leading indicator safety culture surveys (annual and periodic pulse), real-time indicators like safety event reporting and detection rates, and outcome indicators, such as patient and workforce harm rates. Performance and improvement should be tracked internally and complemented by sharing, learning, and benchmarking with similar organizations.

Straying from high reliability practices during times of crisis yields detrimental effects on safety culture, both at the high level and the item level. At the high level, leadership needs to “Message on Safety”: i.e., verbally and visibly acknowledge that protecting patients and the workforce from harm—and driving toward zero harm—is an uncompromisable precondition of every action at the organization. From there, they can accelerate progress in safety and high reliability by continuing to forge and foster the values, norms, and **behaviors that mark a strong safety culture**:

- Measuring harm and making harm visible
- Fostering a fair and just culture
- Practicing daily check-ins for safety

1. Lee A. Fleisher, M.D.; Michelle Schreiber, M.D.; Denise Cardo, M.D.; and Arjun Srinivasan, M.D. “Health Care Safety during the Pandemic and Beyond — Building a System That Ensures Resilience” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, February 2022.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR HEALTHCARE LEADERS

- 1. The decline in safety culture perception requires urgent attention.** First, it signals a weakly embedded safety culture—one that is far from habit. Second, safety outcomes are falling in parallel; perception of safety culture, as measured by survey, is a leading indicator of future safety outcomes.
- 2. Investing in safety culture is worth it for organizational resilience.** In a well-embedded safety culture, behaviors and practices consistent with error prevention and mitigation become habit. And the power of habit (i.e., “how we do things around here”) is that behaviors and processes require less attention and effort to perform and maintain, freeing up more energy to direct at managing the unexpected issues that inevitably arise on a day-to-day basis.
- 3. What should we do, and what can we do?** Comprehensive safety and reliability culture transformation requires focused effort and an infusion of energy into the system—energy that most organizations have been dedicating to COVID-19 crisis management up until now. Moving forward, leaders can—and should—focus on safety culture fundamentals that take little time to implement but yield significant return.

Press Ganey’s book [Zero Harm: First-Focus Fundamentals for Safety Culture Transformation](#) outlines a starting point for establishing the tone for safety culture transformation. These known strategies and tactics to improve culture include leadership commitment to adopting a goal of zero harm and messaging on safety, measuring harm and making harm visible, fostering a fair and just culture, and practicing daily check-ins for safety. Press Ganey’s safety consulting can help you implement these key strategies at your organization. We also have many other resources and consulting offerings to help your organization advance its foundation in safety culture and high reliability, as outlined by the [National Action Plan for Patient Safety](#).

While some fundamentals require focused, longer-term effort, one in particular—“leaders messaging on safety”—can be implemented right away. Use the following questions to gauge the effectiveness of your leadership team in setting the tone and influencing safety culture at your organization.

1. Do executive leaders personally and passionately believe in and speak to the zero-harm goal?
2. Do all meetings start with a safety message to reinforce your commitment to zero harm?
3. Do you encourage, support, and recognize individuals who speak up for safety when they see an unsafe condition and/or suggest a safety improvement?
4. When decisions or changes are considered and made, do you ask, “What impact does this have on safety?”

These leader behaviors are the cornerstone of high reliability—and the cornerstone of building trust and engagement (Table 1). Now is the time to refocus and reenergize efforts on patient safety, in tandem with your work on employee engagement. Improving safety culture will help organizations re-establish and strengthen trust with their workforce. As safety culture and engagement are strongly correlated, it is essential to implement cross-cutting interventions that will improve both domains (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Safety Culture and Engagement Correlation



Table 1: HRO Leader Skills That Build Trust

<p>Message on Mission</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start every meeting with a safety message • Support those who speak up • Put safety first in decision-making
<p>Anticipate to Avoid Events</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily safety check-ins and tiered huddles
<p>Lead Local Learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning board with visual management • Daily problem- and cause-solving • Real-time simulation and testing
<p>Reinforce and Build Accountability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient elopement events

As COVID-19 pushes us into a new normal, leaders must refocus on advancing safety culture to optimize outcomes. What leaders say about safety is important, and what leaders do about safety has a powerful impact on the thinking and actions of others.

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