

Reverse the Trend: Improving Safety Culture in the COVID-19 Era

Safety culture scores declined in 2020, particularly in areas related to staffing, job stress, and organizational commitment to both patient and caregiver safety. This report is a call to action for health care leaders to renew their focus on safety culture in the wake of COVID-19.



21

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 reinforced the importance of highly reliable systems in keeping patients and the workforce safe from harm. The magnitude of the outbreak left health systems overburdened and vulnerable – a pandemic with rapidly changing risks and needs, real or perceived lack of resources, and emotional exhaustion can increase the probability of failures in patient safety and workforce safety. In the absence of robust, scientifically grounded high reliability processes, these risks have the potential to erode safety culture, which is a known necessary foundation to prevent safety events. In addition, safety culture is highly correlated to [workforce engagement](#), so the worsening of safety culture has the potential to impact caregiver burnout and staff turnover.

Leaders must understand the key components of safety culture and swiftly implement best practices for improvement. Of note, the recently released “[National Action Plan to Advance Patient Safety](#)” highlights “leadership and culture” as one of the four foundational pillars that advance patient safety. In this report, we share national data and trends on safety culture prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. What follows are critical, high-impact strategies to improve safety culture at your organization.



Figure 1. Even after a period of modest improvement from 2017 to 2019, scores for most safety culture themes declined in 2020, particularly in the categories of Prevention & Reporting and Resources & Teamwork. Scores for the Pride & Reputation theme stayed consistent.



Before the pandemic, the gradual trend in safety culture themes was worrisome: Improvements in safety culture weren't happening fast enough. When COVID-19 hit, it amplified the already high-pressure environment at the nation's health care organizations, and safety culture outcomes suffered. As the U.S. 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.

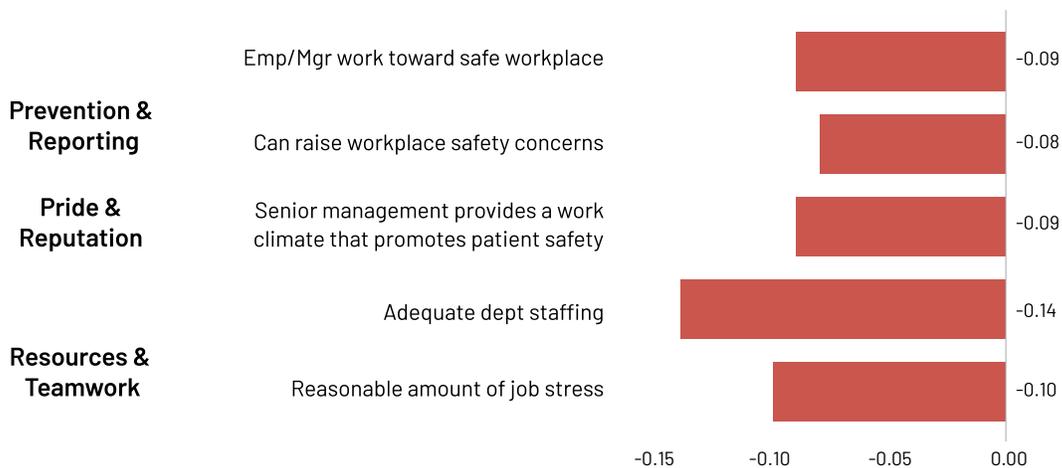
Fortunately, hospital leaders can begin to reverse the downward trend in safety culture and drive improvement efforts forward. This requires a focused organization-wide strategy with disciplined implementation of high reliability principles. Leadership needs to message on safety and verbally and visibly acknowledge that protecting patients and the workforce from harm—getting to Zero Harm—is an uncompromisable precondition of every action at the organization. They also need to focus on creating a culture where all employees know that safety is the core value, staff have the psychological safety to raise concerns, and staffing and job stress are addressed through appropriate processes and operational redesign.

Leaders 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, including measuring harm and making harm visible, fostering a fair and just culture, and practicing daily check-ins for safety.

Leaders can measure progress through a combination of leading safety culture perception 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.

Figure 2. Scores reflecting staffing, job stress, and both caregiver and patient safety saw the greatest drop-off in 2020.

Items with Largest Change in Scores: Median 2020 Score vs. Median 2019 Score



Key Takeaways for Health Care Leaders

- 1. The recent decline in safety culture perception needs urgent attention.** First, it is a signal of a weakly embedded safety culture—one that is far from habit. Any effort that was invested to achieve the modest increases in safety culture perception from 2017 to 2019 has been diverted to responding to and managing the stress of the COVID-19 crisis. Second, it's a forewarning that safety outcomes are likely to fall in parallel. Perception of safety culture, as measured by surveys, is a leading indicator of future safety outcomes.
- 2. The investment in the safety culture work is worth it.** 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 that are habit require less attention and effort to perform and maintain, freeing up more energy to be directed at managing the unexpected challenges that arise on a day-to-day basis.
- 3. What can we do, and what *should* 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 but yield significant return.



Beware of a **decline in safety culture**, as it can indicate a future decline in safety **performance**.

While some of the fundamentals outlined 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 the question, “What impact does this have on safety?”

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.

If you would like information about Insync/Press Ganey’s Safety Culture solutions please contact the following:

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Press Ganey’s workbook “[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.