

CASE STUDIES

Proof in Practice



How One Organization Trained Frontline Leaders to Spot Productivity Blockers

Empowering everyday leadership for everyday results.

CONTEXT

Hamilton Health Sciences (HHS), one of Canada's largest hospital networks, serves more than 2.3 million residents across southern Ontario.

Like many large health systems, HHS faced mounting pressure to increase efficiency while preserving care quality. Bottlenecks in patient flow, lab turnaround, and documentation were costing both time and morale. When HHS launched its Quality & Safety Framework in 2017, executives realized that true productivity improvement couldn't come only from senior management, it had to begin at the front line.

THE CHALLENGE

Frontline teams—nurses, technologists, and unit clerks were closest to workflow issues but rarely had tools or authority to address them.

Managers spent much of their day firefighting rather than improving processes. Data on daily operations existed, but insights were delayed and often too high-level to guide real-time action.

Key challenges included:

- Hidden waste: Small inefficiencies multiplied across shifts.
- Communication gaps: Teams lacked a shared visual system to discuss performance.

Leadership bottlenecks: Problem-solving defaulted upward instead of being solved where work happened.

APPROACH

HHS introduced a Lean Daily Management System (LDMS), a structured approach combining visual management, tiered huddles, and coaching skills training for frontline leaders.

1. Visual Management Boards

Every unit created a whiteboard tracking daily safety, quality, delivery, and people metrics. Teams used simple colour codes, green for on target, yellow for at risk, red for off track, to make performance visible at a glance.

2. Tiered Huddles

Short daily stand-ups connected frontline teams, middle management, and executives.

- Tier 1 huddles: 5 minutes on the unit to surface issues.
- Tier 2 huddles: Managers escalated unresolved blockers.
- Tier 3 huddles: Executives reviewed system-level themes.

This created a two-way communication flow within hours instead of weeks.

3. Leader Standard Work

Supervisors adopted checklists and coaching routines to sustain focus on improvement, not just compliance. They learned to ask, “What is stopping you from meeting your target today?” instead of telling staff what to do.

4. Frontline Coaching and Training

HHS partnered with the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) and Lean Healthcare Academy to train hundreds of frontline leaders in visual problem-solving and root-cause analysis.

Sessions emphasized psychological safety and shared accountability.

RESULTS

Within the first 18 months:

- 70 % of units reported faster issue resolution (under 24 hours vs. 5 days previously).
- Average patient transfer time dropped by 23 %.
- Employee engagement scores improved by 12 points on the internal pulse survey.
- Supervisors reported saving 1–2 hours per day previously spent on email and follow-ups.

The HHS model won the 2020 Excellence in Quality Improvement Award from the Ontario Hospital Association for demonstrating “embedded frontline leadership capacity in continuous improvement.”

“Our biggest shift was seeing leadership as a daily habit, not a job title.”

— Manager, Acute Care Unit, HHS



LESSONS LEARNED

1. Empower through visibility.

Productivity blockers surface when everyone sees the same data.

2. Consistency beats intensity.

Daily 5-minute huddles proved more effective than occasional major workshops.

3. Managers as coaches.

Leadership training shifted mindsets from supervising to developing others.

4. Celebrate fixes, not findings.

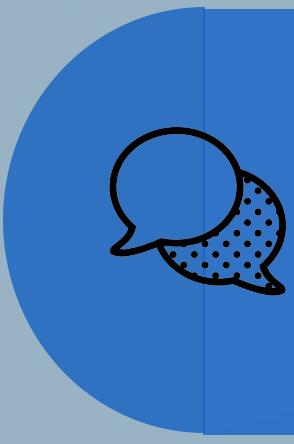
Recognition was linked to problem-solving success, not reporting errors.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Start small: Launch a visual board and daily huddle in one team first.
- Ask the right question: “What’s blocking you today?”
- Coach frontline leaders to solve issues within their control before escalating.
- Use a simple colour system to track status visually.
- Keep metrics human. A few meaningful numbers drive more change than a wall of charts.

REFERENCES

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Share your thoughts, your examples

We are always looking forward to learn as a community.

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