All Voices Matter: How a High Reliability Organization (HRO) Program Helps Research Teams Succeed

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1. Background
A High Reliability Organization (HRO) program is a cultural approach adopted by teams that perform complex work and are motivated by one or more factors to minimize their tolerance for failure. HROs are characterized by an emphasis on foresight and frequent detailed communication to anticipate and address risks. Clinical research in a cancer setting possesses both the complexity (large teams with varied responsibilities, highly detailed protocols, busy clinical setting) as well as compelling factors to minimize risk (patient safety above all else), which led the Perlmutter Cancer Center (PCC) Clinical Trials Office (CTO) to implement an HRO program in 2021.

2. Goals
Our HRO goal is to provide the highest quality of care and safety for our patients while eliminating preventable harm. We believe providing space for all CTO members to review near-misses, praise successes, and discuss challenging situations can help us achieve that goal. We measure our quality of care and safety by tracking employee engagement (Perceptyx survey), patient satisfaction (Press Ganey survey), preventable Reportable New Information (RNI), and outcomes of research audits.

3. Solutions and Methods
Our HRO program is centered on our HRO huddle, a brief (20 minute) weekly videoconference attended by a majority (>75 percent) of our 219 full time employees along with our CTO faculty leadership. Each huddle begins with an emphasis on our ground rules (all voices matter, and the value of "safety stories") followed by a review of the five HRO principles:

- Preoccupation with Failure
- Reluctance to Simplify
- Sensitivity to Operations
- Commitment to Resilience
- Deference to Expertise

By continually reminding attendees of our commitment to these shared principles, our HRO huddles contribute to an environment where employees are more comfortable speaking up when they identify deficiencies in our workflow. Our huddles include "safety stories" (narrative descriptions of misses, or near-misses, in our work) which are discussed openly in a constructive tone. This creates an environment where individuals can take responsibility without fear of blame or stigma. Each huddle celebrates our successes as well: employees and investigators submit notes of gratitude and praise for one another, and we set aside time for these sentiments to be shared among the entire department. Finally, our huddles typically feature an educational component, for example a brief policy refresher or update, a crisis-management drill, or occasionally a special training series presented by a subject matter expert over multiple consecutive weeks.

4. Outcomes
The impact of our HRO culture is reflected by an increase in key employee engagement results (12 percent average gain in key areas). We exceeded our goal for patient satisfaction in 2023 (>96 percent),

sustained a 60 percent reduction in preventable clinical RNI, and maintained 100 percent acceptable audit outcomes with a 50 percent decrease in major internal audit findings from 2022 to 2023.

5. Lessons Learned and Future Directions
We've learned that a short weekly meeting can help sustain our capability for high quality work by creating a space for employees to share their insights and learn from one another. We believe that employees are benefitting from our HRO culture and principles within their individual teams, and we're interested in exploring the possibility of bringing a more formal HRO-structure to smaller team meetings and one-on-ones.

Figure

HRO Programming Helps Research Teams Succeed