

Tahoe Forest Hospital District advances employee engagement through high reliability principles

A people-first approach to leadership, structure and communication led to stronger engagement and a more resilient care team.

Summary

Tahoe Forest Hospital District (TFHD) serves six rural counties across California and Nevada, operating a 25-bed acute care hospital and 36-bed long-term care facility. In 2017, TFHD launched a behavioral health service line. Initially grant-funded and staffed by a single licensed clinical social worker, the service line began expansion in 2018 and by 2023, shifted to a payor reimbursement model.

However, rapid growth brought new challenges. Leadership turnover, unclear reporting structures, and provider shortages contributed to low employee engagement. The region's pressing need for behavioral health services intensified the strain on the system and its people.

Highlights

- Launched a **structured road map and steering committee**
- Established a **dyad leadership model**
- Recruited **five new behavioral health providers**
- **Improved employee engagement** in 7 out of 9 SCOR® domains

The challenge

As demand for behavioral health services grew, the organization faced mounting pressure to expand access and support an overstretched team. Staffing shortages, leadership turnover and undefined reporting structures strained both operations and culture.

Despite a strong mission and commitment to serving rural communities, the behavioral health service line was showing signs of organizational fatigue:

- **Persistent vacancies for licensed providers and support staff**, driven by geographic remoteness, high cost of living and weather-related commuting challenges
- **Low employee engagement**, especially in perceptions of leadership, culture and emotional well-being, as measured by SCOR—a survey assessing safety, culture, operational reliability and resilience/burnout
- **Fragmented leadership structure** creating ambiguous reporting relationships, and unclear accountability and communication channels

Without immediate action, the organization risked continued turnover, low morale and limited capacity to serve its community.

The solution

To address these issues, TFHD partnered with Kaufman Hall, a Vizient company, to perform a High Reliability Organization (HRO) assessment. This comprehensive review covered regulatory, financial, operational, safety, cultural and process elements. The result: a gap analysis that served as the foundation for action.

Two collaborative design sessions helped TFHD prioritize “the vital few” actions, resulting in a practical one-year roadmap focused on people, structure and engagement.

Key initiatives included:



Leadership

Establishing new leadership roles and a clear reporting structure



Workforce

Recruiting providers to meet demand



Culture

Rolling out targeted strategies to improve employee engagement

Implementation

A Behavioral Health Road Map Steering Committee was formed to oversee implementation, with regular status reviews ensuring accountability and momentum. Leaders used coaching sessions to embed improvement science into team operations.



Building capacity

To build internal capability, staff were trained in high reliability principles and improvement science, including leadership behaviors, A3 problem-solving and visual management. Structured huddles, rounding and coaching reinforced daily accountability.



Leadership and provider recruitment

To support a new dyad model, TFHD hired a Director of Operations and Medical Director, enabling clear clinical and operational leadership. Five additional providers were recruited to expand access and meet growing demand.



Employee engagement

Employee retreats, weekly huddles, and a visual management board strengthened communication, transparency and alignment, while leader rounding and one-on-ones reinforced trust and support.



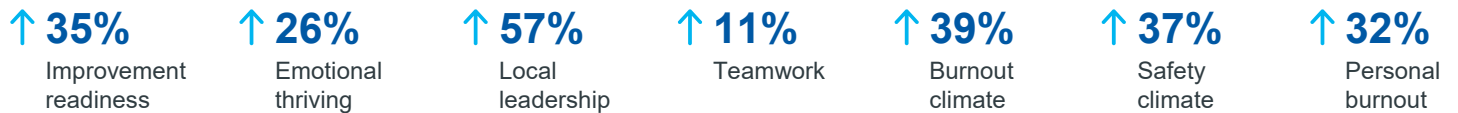
SCOR debriefs

While SCOR data highlighted how many employees felt a certain way, debriefs uncovered the reasons why staff held those perceptions—giving staff a voice, deepening leadership insight and driving more focused, impactful action planning.

Impact and outcome

Prioritizing people and culture resulted in improvement in 7/9 SCOR survey domains:

Percentage improvement in SCOR domains (*Higher is better*)



Key success factors

- **Executive commitment:** Direct involvement from CEO, CFO, CMO and COO signaled prioritization from the top.
- **Dyad leadership model:** Strong championship from operational and clinical leadership built trust and accountability.
- **Structured management system:** A consistent cadence of huddles, visual tools and leader touchpoints enabled alignment, transparency, and continuous improvement

Conclusion

Tahoe Forest Hospital District's transformation was powered by highly engaged leadership, a culture of trust and a focus on people. Guided by a co-designed road map and high-reliability principles, the organization revitalized its behavioral health service line. The result was engaged employees, improved care delivery and a stronger connection to the community.

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Contact us to schedule a strategy session or learn more.

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