

CASE STUDY

Building a culture of accountability and care at Hillcrest

Hillcrest transformed patient experience through executive ownership, servant leadership, and frontline empowerment.



The client

- Level 2 trauma center
- County hospital setting
- Part of Baylor Scott & White Health
- More than 68,000 ER visits, more than 16,000 admissions, and more than 2,700 deliveries/year
- 260 bed hospital

Hillcrest Medical Center—part of Baylor Scott & White Health—is a Level 2 trauma facility and community hospital in Waco. Hillcrest serves a diverse patient population with complex challenges, often under resource constraints that make delivering exceptional experiences even more difficult.

What sets Hillcrest apart is how they turned those challenges into an opportunity for transformation. Through deliberate focus and intentional movements, with their culture and people at the forefront of every decision, they became a model for how **servant leadership and accountability** can drive sustainable patient experience outcomes, even in the most demanding care environments.

The challenge

From September 2024 through March 2025, Hillcrest's PX scores were showing a downward trend, lagging behind national benchmarks. In digging into the why behind this data, they realized they had a cultural disconnect in their midst that was affecting trust, morale, and patient confidence. Communication gaps weren't isolated; they showed up in critical areas like medication explanations and physician interactions, creating frustration for patients and stress for staff. In such a high-acuity, high-stakes setting as trauma, these breakdowns had real consequences: delayed understanding of care plans, increased service recovery incidents, and staff feeling reactive instead of proactive.

Leaders realized that fixing a metric wouldn't solve the problem. Their only path forward was to rebuild the culture from the inside out, reshaping the environment until accountability, presence, and listening were embodied at every level. Without this shift, they risked perpetuating a cycle of disengagement and eroding patient trust.

The action

Hillcrest's transformation was built with the precedence of this commitment: leadership would lead—and they would lead by example. With guidance from Press Ganey, Dr. Umad Ahmad, Chief Medical Officer, and Ben Larsen, Patient Experience Leader, launched a multi-year strategy focused on executive presence and accountability.

The foundation of this change was executive rounding, carried out three times per week. They didn't treat these rounds as just a box to check off—they became purposeful, pragmatic conversations with patients and staff, grounded in Press Ganey's High Reliability Rounding principles. Leaders shared feedback in real time, celebrated wins, and addressed concerns on the spot, creating a sense of transparency and trust that had long eluded them.

Leaders reinforced this culture through small but intentional actions: pausing at nurses' stations, engaging in casual conversation before discussing performance, and inviting staff perspectives. These behaviors kept reinforcing the belief that “you can't make patients happy until staff are happy.”

To reinforce this newfound culture of accountability, Dr. Ahmad and Ben Larsen took ownership of every physician-related service recovery ticket in iRound, their digital rounding platform, for three consecutive years. For the last 18 months of that time frame, Dr. Ahmad personally responded to every physician communication complaint. Their involvement sent a powerful message: patient experience was a leadership priority, not an afterthought.

This message and their presence inspired others. Nursing leaders and float pool nurses began modeling the same behaviors, creating momentum across different units. And service recovery didn't stop after onboarding—it continued well beyond the first 90 days, causing new hires to understand that patient experience was part of the culture from day one.

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We wanted to show that leadership isn't just related to oversight, but about presence, listening, and accountability.

Dr. Umad Ahmad

CMO

Hillcrest



The results

Hillcrest's transformation led to other remarkable improvements:

- PX scores rose to the 88th percentile nationally in FY25—a milestone described internally as a “miracle” for a county hospital.
- Staff engagement improved across the board, with higher scores in the internal People Survey and increased identification of service recovery opportunities.
- Leadership pipeline grew organically, as more staff stepped up as PX ambassadors.

Staff surveys started reflecting the impact of the cultural shift. Morale climbed, and safety culture scores showed measurable improvement. New hires described Hillcrest as feeling like “home” and “family”—a powerful, but often paradoxical, sentiment for a trauma hospital setting.



Future outlook



We've built something sustainable, because it's rooted in people.

Ben Larsen

Patient Experience Leader
Hillcrest

Hillcrest's journey is continuing with the same energy that sparked its initial transformation. Patient experience practices are now embedded into new-hire training and ongoing education, setting the stage so every new team member understands the role they play in creating exceptional care.

What started as an effort to improve communication evolved into something they never expected when taking the first steps—a culture where every employee feels empowered to make a difference. This commitment to people and relationships is what makes Hillcrest's progress sustainable and scalable for the future.

Their approach continues to influence other departments and facilities within Baylor Scott & White Health, proving that Hillcrest's model can scale beyond a single hospital, to have organization-wide results and reach.

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