

## Case Study: Lifespan

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Location: Lifespan, Rhode Island's first health system, was founded in 1994 by Rhode Island Hospital and The Miriam Hospital. A comprehensive, integrated, academic health system, Lifespan's present partners also include RI Hospital's Hasbro Children's Hospital, Bradley Hospital, Newport Hospital and Gateway Healthcare Services.

### Saved \$12 Million and Improved Quality Using HQ Essentials

Approximately four years ago, Lifespan, Rhode Island's largest healthcare system, realized it needed to restructure and redesign how core quality functions were being managed across the enterprise. Back then, every hospital had its own quality department, with its own director and no centralized system for coordinating and guiding quality activities for the system. Those quality leaders and teams, were generalists, and responsible for managing a large breadth of quality functions with little opportunity to gain specialized skills consistent with high-performing healthcare quality and process/performance improvement activities. Professionals in these roles realized they needed to master new competencies and advance the core skills required to accelerate the pace of improvement and better position the organization for success in a changing healthcare environment.

Lifespan took a multi-year journey to centralize and restructure its quality resources and improve quality functions. With the support of and in concert with an interprofessional collaborative executive leadership team (chief executive officer, chief medical officer, and chief nursing officer), quality and process/performance improvement leaders transitioned into a central team consisting of core subteams aimed at managing specific core quality domains. They implemented a standard improvement science method utilizing Lean Six Sigma tools and principles, as well as trained interprofessional staff as black and green belts. Lifespan created a new quality structure, position descriptions, along with self and team assessments to identify gaps and create personal and team professional development education programs by utilizing *HQ Essentials: Competencies for the Healthcare Quality Profession*, published by the National Association of Healthcare Quality (NAHQ).

Lifespan's new Operational Excellence (OpX) division is the overarching umbrella from which traditional quality core functions are organized, and is structured with a single leadership team with assigned responsibility for specialty teams (Accreditation and Regulatory Readiness, Patient Safety, Service Excellence, OpX Informatics and Programming, Clinical Excellence, and Process/Performance Improvement). A system-wide director serves as each specialty team's leader, reporting to an overall leader: the vice president of operational excellence. This action empowered each team member to become more specialized in his or her area or function and share knowledge and lessons learned across the system.

“Maintaining universally high standards for required work and activities is much easier when you provide clear structure across the system,” said Dr. Nidia Williams, vice president of operational excellence.

As the specialty quality teams were formed, Lifespan enhanced its healthcare professional training programs with specific focus and commitment to the use of Lean/Six Sigma tools, in alignment with the *HQ Essentials* competency areas from NAHQ for current positions in the division. The first competency area of *HQ Essentials* is Process and Performance Improvement (PPI) and represents a core function for all healthcare quality professionals at Lifespan. A focus on PPI requires all Lifespan healthcare quality professionals to earn Six Sigma Green Belt certification, giving specialized teams a baseline understanding of a core professional competency.

To ensure this baseline is met effectively, Lifespan offers Green Belt and Black Belt certification through its own curriculum. Further, all healthcare quality professionals – regardless of team – are trained in root cause analysis work, and focus heavily on data to drive decision making and process improvement work. Once this baseline training is completed, each team of quality specialists then focuses additional training on their specified expertise, following the competency areas of *HQ Essentials*, which in addition to PPI, include: Population Health & Care Transitions; Health Data Analytics; Patient Safety; Regulatory & Accreditation; and Quality Review & Accountability.

Restructuring the healthcare quality function into specialty teams, implementing rigorous training to ensure a baseline of competency, and centralizing overall leadership of the healthcare quality function has yielded tremendous results. These results are reflected system-wide and in individual hospitals.

Over the last two years, Lifespan’s Rhode Island Hospital was able to reduce patient harm and was not penalized by regulatory bodies. This achievement is remarkable for an academic medical center with 719 beds, one of the busiest Emergency Departments in the nation, and is designated as a level one trauma center.

Focusing on a coordinated, competent workforce has also helped Lifespan save millions of dollars. Dr. Williams estimates that implementing Lean tools and *HQ Essentials* has helped the organization save more than \$12 million over the last 4 years. “By restructuring and having a highly-trained workforce we’re able to do more with our quality allocation resources, and help lead the organization in waste reduction efforts aimed at improving efficiency, and lowering costs,” she said.

“We’re actually doing more proactive work now with fewer staff members, as compared to the prior decentralized model,” said Dr. Williams. “Now that we have moved to this new model it has helped develop leaders and staff, giving them, the skills needed to achieve success in the era of value based payment systems.”

The *HQ Essentials* framework was critical to this success, said Dr. Williams. “The biggest problem the *HQ Essentials* addressed was in defining specific competencies at levels from novice to mastery to expert. It really helped our leadership team not only identify, recruit, and train candidates, but to monitor and evaluate progress as developing healthcare professionals along a career pathway.”

Beyond cost savings and expertise, the body of knowledge represented in NAHQ’s *HQ Essentials* has made it much easier to communicate expectations of staff and prepare for the future, said Dr. Williams. “*HQ Essentials* is a tool that leaders in healthcare quality can use to further prepare and define the workforce needed for the future of healthcare quality. The future is about making sure people now have skills that healthcare professionals 10 or 15 years ago didn’t have, and likely didn’t realize they needed for success.”

### **Turning to NAHQ for Professional Development**

Lifespan recognizes the value that NAHQ offers through its educational programming and integrates them into the professional development plans for its staff. Dr. Williams shared that she and other Lifespan leaders direct their team members toward earning the Certified Professional in Healthcare Quality® (CPHQ), the profession's only accredited certification. In addition, Lifespan brought a contingent to NAHQ Next, its annual conference, where the team selected from among 70+ sessions to enhance their healthcare quality knowledge.

Dr. Williams encourages Lifespan employees to enroll in NAHQ's programs because she feels it helps them develop as professionals. "You can find little pieces of what we do in lots of other different professional organizations, but healthcare quality itself, this is what I consider NAHQ to provide to us. They're our professional home," she said.