



MISSION TRANSFORMMEDICINE

A KERN NATIONAL NETWORK CONVENING

Healthcare Stakeholders Convene to Explore Shifting the Culture of Medicine

At the end of 2021, the KNN convened three cohorts, including learners and leaders from healthcare systems and medical education, to embark on Mission: TransformMedicine—discussing, analyzing and reimagining how caring, character and human flourishing contribute to organizational cultures in healthcare. The following offers key takeaways from the discussions.

“Flourishing is a lifelong journey, and it’s best to have conversations about flourishing with people who deeply care about you.” With those words, Matthew T. Lee, PhD, director of empirical research at the Harvard Institute for Quantitative Social Science’s Human Flourishing Program, began his [presentation on flourishing in healthcare](#).

After Dr. Lee’s presentation, *Mission: TransformMedicine* participants broke into small groups, and their discussions made clear that these individuals indeed cared deeply about their colleagues, organizations and the presence of caring, character and flourishing within medicine. From those conversations, several key lessons emerged for transforming medical education and practice environments.



Culture Change is the Greatest Need—and Challenge

Once Dr. Lee had presented research and stories to ground the concept of flourishing, participants shared thoughts that came to mind during his talk and what they wanted to explore further during the session. Many individuals’ ideas involved shifting existing cultures and environments. For instance, some focused on identifying factors that currently limit or inhibit flourishing within an organization. Others noted the importance of finding creative, innovative ways to effect change that enables others to flourish—and being able to modify those strategies to fit different institutions. Perhaps most telling, another participant raised the need to find ways to integrate the concept of flourishing into learning and practice environments that are not currently designed for it.

Connection is Central to Flourishing

Flourishing can take many forms and may look different from person to person. For instance, as some discussion groups noted, vulnerability can be a manifestation of strength and flourishing. Yet when participants shared examples of times they had experienced or witnessed flourishing, the majority revolved around connection. A number observed that social connections and relationships are an important dimension of one’s individual flourishing; one group said they felt that expressions of caring from others, no matter how small, allowed them to better thrive. Others described the importance of staying connected with a community and continuing to be involved in efforts or areas that ignite their passions. The discussion also highlighted that having shared team goals allows a group to flourish and grow together more easily. Above all, opportunities to build new relationships and enhance existing ones were cited as essential for flourishing.

Beyond community connection, however, participants also cited the need for connecting with the self and with a higher purpose: having time for reflection and performing functions that have larger meaning. As one extreme example, a participant shared the story of a surgeon experiencing burnout—who decided to enter a seminary and flourished from the experience (and risk) of deeply exploring his identity, values and the humanistic aspects of medicine.

“I don’t want to feel like a cog in a machine; I want to feel like a colleague on a mission.”

– *Mission: TransformMedicine* Participant

Leaders’ Actions Shape the Culture

Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants viewed leadership as integral to setting the tone and shaping a culture that enables demonstration of caring and character. They described the value of individuals who lead by example or “lead from the front” and model the behavior they want to instill in others. Along with leadership behaviors, the conversation also focused on the fact that leaders play a crucial role in ensuring everyone has a clear connection to—and shared language around—the mission of an organization.

Although role models and established values were identified as necessary for an environment of caring and character, they were not considered sufficient by themselves. Discussion groups pointed out that organizational cultures must also proactively encourage and reward individuals demonstrating those attributes. Shifting an institution’s culture may require revisiting award and recognition systems—whether for grading or career advancement—to ensure they align with stated organizational values. For schools, it may also require adjusting recruiting avenues and admissions criteria, such as using character measurements or other holistic criteria.

Psychological Safety Enables Expression of Caring, Character and Flourishing

Along with citing leadership, *Mission: TransformMedicine* participants also stressed the importance of creating psychological safety within teams and organizations. As one example, participants discussed how having a support network consisting of all levels of faculty and staff would generate the psychological safety needed for reflection, growth and development. Even better, some noted, would be all teams coming together on the same level; specifically, removing hierarchical practices would create mutual learning opportunities and a positive culture where everyone works together as a team.



To learn more about character strengths vital for creating psychological safety in the clinical learning environment, [access the KNN’s video series](#).

In general, the discussion groups noted that organizations will need to foster a growth mindset and create time and opportunities to learn or practice related concepts. Equally important, participants highlighted the need to build in time for reflection, relaxation and expression as well.

Further Focus on Measurement, Culture and Leadership is Needed

All that said, it will come as no surprise that time and resources are at a premium. Asked what they would change if they had a magic wand, some participants mentioned adding resources to generate more time and space. Others focused on administrative barriers, seeking to make healthcare free or to otherwise “remove the commercialization and financial gains that erode trusting relationships.” Yet, despite a focus on structural changes, participants did recognize that small changes over time can also produce a large impact.

Ultimately, discussions in the first session of *Mission: TransformMedicine* revealed a need for ongoing exploration of measurement and incentives; cultural change; and leadership for flourishing. Throughout this year, future *Mission: TransformMedicine* sessions will focus on each of these areas and bring stakeholders together to identify potential strategies for improvement and opportunities for collaboration. ■