

# 2019-2021: Methodology and approach to discover unique behaviors of top performers

To build upon over a decade of research into the characteristics of high-performing academic medical centers (AMCs), Vizient launched a multi-year study focused on understanding what distinguishes “**sustainers**”—organizations that have consistently ranked among the top performers in Vizient’s **Quality and Accountability Study** for **8 to 12 of the past 15 years**, including the **most recent two years**.

The study set out to uncover the **enduring systems, leadership behaviors, and cultural norms** that allow organizations not only to reach but to **sustain** excellence in clinical performance, safety, and patient-centered care. Importantly, the findings were designed to offer **practical insights** for health care leaders across all types of health systems—not just academic institutions.

## Methodology overview

The study included:

- **Three “sustainer” academic medical centers**, meeting the 8–12-year performance threshold
- A **comparison group** of AMCs that had ranked in the top tier 4–7 times in the last 15 years but **not in the last two years**
- **Site visits and virtual interviews** with a broad spectrum of roles: executive leaders, board members, physician leaders, nursing staff, and quality professionals

Vizient applied the same quantitative scoring framework used in the Quality and Accountability ranking, which weighs six performance domains:

Domain	Weight
Safety	25%
Mortality	25%
Effectiveness	20%
Patient-centeredness	15%
Efficiency	10%
Equity	5%

This composite scoring system serves as the foundation for annual rankings and was used as a backdrop to understand what distinguishes long-term top performers.

## Key findings

1. **Enduring practices transcend operational challenges**  
Sustainer organizations exhibit systems and behaviors that are so deeply embedded in their culture they persist

through leadership changes, crises, and evolving industry pressures. These are not temporary initiatives—they are core operating principles.

## 2. **Relentless focus on the patient experience**

Across every sustainer site, one theme emerged as a cultural constant: a deep and visible commitment to the best possible patient experience. Leaders, physicians, managers, and staff consistently approached their work with patient outcomes and experiences at the forefront of every decision and action.

## 3. **Variability in tactics, consistency in purpose**

While individual institutions differed in how they implemented programs and managed alignment, each sustainer demonstrated a palpable intensity and discipline around execution. Their methods may differ, but their shared purpose—delivering exceptional care—was unmistakable.

## 4. **Leadership behaviors aligned with system-wide goals**

Sustainers showed high alignment between leadership behaviors and strategic intent. Senior leaders consistently modeled the organization's values, provided clarity on priorities, and empowered mid-level managers and front-line staff to act on those priorities.

## 5. **Broad, cross-functional engagement in improvement**

Staff engagement wasn't limited to formal quality departments. Sustainers integrated improvement work across disciplines and levels, embedding responsibility for performance into everyday roles—from board members to bedside clinicians.

## 6. **Sustainers reaffirm earlier findings**

This study validated the foundational themes from Vizient's original 2005 research and subsequent studies:

- Shared sense of purpose
- Distributed and accountable leadership
- Empowerment of front-line teams
- Clear focus on measurable results
- Collaboration and transparency

The difference now lies in the depth of integration: these practices are not projects—they are the culture.

## Conclusion

Sustaining excellence over a decade or more requires more than a strong quality improvement team or a successful initiative. It demands **systemic alignment**, **cultural resilience**, and **unwavering focus** on what matters most: the patient.

This study highlights that **sustainers are not just high-performing—they are high-reliability organizations**, with mature systems that allow them to adapt, scale, and continuously improve. Their practices are a blueprint for any health system aspiring not only to improve, but to embed that improvement into the very fabric of their operations.

As Vizient continues to support its members, the insights from this study offer both inspiration and a **practical roadmap** for cultivating enduring organizational excellence.

Learn more about Vizient's work around [top performance](#).