

REPORT

High performance

vizient®

# CEO Spotlight: How healthcare leaders can harness high-performance principles





**If you want to know what high performance looks like, look no further than the five organizations featured in this report.**

At Vizient®, we work with high performers like these every day -- but we never see the same story across every institution. Just as individual hospitals are unique, so too are the areas in which they thrive. Some shine in quality, others in operational efficiency. There are those that excel in safety and those who stand out for financial sustainability.

But the five organizations featured here have one big thing in common: Through their leaders' multifaceted focus on principles including benchmarking, systemness, innovation and health equity, they've built a reputation for excellence that is, crucially, underpinned by a commitment to first-class culture.

And true high performance, they say, means never straying from the core of your No. 1 mission.

"Different variables are introduced every year," said Johnese Spisso, president of UCLA Health and CEO of UCLA Hospital System. "Stay true to the plan that you know will provide the best outcomes for patients."

**The words leaders said best described their institutions in relation to high performance:**

- Caring
- Culture-centered
- Excellent
- Impactful
- Innovative
- Patient-centered
- Personal
- Safe
- Seamless

# Bolster quality through benchmarking

*“Together, we get better faster.” — Dr. Michael McDermott*

Whether the path ahead is smooth or a little bumpy, achieving high performance begins with objectively assessing exactly where you are on your journey to enhanced quality and operational efficiency, not only against your competition and peers but also within your own system.

And there’s one surefire way to stick a pin in the appropriate starting point on your roadmap: benchmarking.

“You have to accept reality for what it is and then find ways to move forward innovatively,” said Dr. Michael McDermott, president and CEO of Virginia-based Mary Washington Healthcare. “Through benchmarking, you can learn where — and why — other providers are performing better and implement those best practices in your own health system.”

## Why is benchmarking important?

For one, there’s no denying the data. You may think you’re performing well, but all five CEOs agreed that true measurement will reveal if you’re faring worse (or perhaps better) than expected.

Once you have the numbers:

- **Reach out to peer systems that are top performers in the areas you’ve assessed.** The CEOs interviewed often draw on Vizient Member Networks and Performance Improvement Collaboratives to facilitate connections that allow for strategy sharing.
- **Use the results as a “North Star” to motivate your employees to further strive for excellence — and establish performance improvement as a non-negotiable in your organization.** For example, share benchmarking data with managers and multidisciplinary team members and incorporate it into staff incentive programs. A balance between access to data for analysis and centralization of data for maintenance and continuity must be struck to ensure the organization can maintain a culture of improvement.
- **Consider the implications for financial sustainability.** Cost benchmarking frequently shows that top-performing organizations have lower cost structures — challenging the notion that reducing expenses will impact quality.
- **Don’t forget your “why.” After all, the numbers represent more than just performance: They represent people.** Positioning data at the center of your strategy to improve quality and operational efficiencies is truly a patient-first approach.
- **Put the data in perspective.** Yes, you’re looking at how you compare to other institutions, but it’s equally important to benchmark against your organizational strategy and goals.
- **Remember that short-term benchmarking involves tracking important metrics and making incremental improvements based on your annual plans.** It’s simple, but essential, advice: Prioritize patient safety and performance improvement over rankings.



## What tools can you use to benchmark?

Each CEO pointed to the Vizient Clinical Data Base (CDB) and Operational Data Base (ODB) as integral to their system’s benchmarking efforts. The CDB contains outcomes data from more than 1,000 hospitals that enables benchmarking to reduce variation and identify and sustain performance improvements, while the ODB provides financial and operational analytics that uncover opportunities to boost performance, reduce costs and improve budgeting.



## Achieve consistency with systemness

*“Aligning as a system is not just a necessity but an opportunity to increase the impact on our communities when they need us most.” — Gerald “J.P.” Gallagher*

It’s understandable that in today’s endlessly challenging and ever-evolving healthcare landscape, mergers and acquisitions are on the rise. After all, they help hospitals expand clinical offerings, increase access to specialists, reduce costs and, most importantly, better serve patients.

But no matter the M&A structure, these partnerships raise a complex question: How do you ensure consistent quality, care and culture across individual locations as your system grows?

It’s a challenge that CEOs like Gerald “J.P.” Gallagher have confronted head on. As president and CEO of Illinois-based Endeavor Health (f.k.a NorthShore — Edward-Elmhurst Health), Gallagher has seen the system go from four hospitals to nine in the space of three years. He knew the key to establishing a uniform approach across each location resided in the concept of “systemness” — providing a consistent, high-quality experience for patients and employees throughout the continuum by integrating all aspects of governance, operations and workflows.

“We quickly realized that to fulfill our commitment to our communities, we had to lean into being a singular system,” Gallagher said. “It was critical to provide support across the entire organization: quality collaboratives, data, looking at variation and bringing physicians together to identify the priorities we should tackle.”



### What are some ways to achieve systemness?

- **Break down silos by emphasizing a shared sense of accountability to drive high performance — and really think about how to best catalyze those efforts.** For instance, Endeavor Health created a Transformation Office for the entire organization that focuses on supporting major goals including financial sustainability and increased access to care. A single operating view of metrics across the system can help facilitate a system view.
- **Develop and enact a coordinated go-to-market approach.** This means ensuring patients have access to specialists across the entire system regardless of where they choose to receive care. One strategy is to bring together physician leaders to consider system priorities and how to translate those into recruitment efforts that lead to increased care options, even in subspecialties.
- **Collaboration and constant communication are essential.** Leaders should start with listening and then seek to understand. It’s important to be visible across the system and intentional about providing forums to personally connect and hear about challenges and successes firsthand. Especially following acquisitions, employees may undergo a sort of grief process, and it’s important to allow them to work through those feelings while fostering a culture where people feel like they are seen, heard and valued — and that they belong.
- **Build teams that are singularly aligned throughout the system to break down the mindset of individual hospital affiliations.** Continue to build toward a united culture by infusing a “one team, one jersey” energy into the system through clear (and frequent) communication around your shared values and vision for the future. Consistent leadership expectations across the system can help facilitate a culture centered around systemness. Houston Methodist, for example, expects each of its seven community hospitals to achieve the same results, even while serving different patient populations. All five CEOs noted that it’s crucial to focus on cross-pollinating best practices and leveraging tools like Vizient to drive consistency and performance improvement across your health system.



## Focus on the future through innovation

*“Innovation is about more than just clinical research. It’s taken on a much broader definition — it’s about how we take care of our patients and our workforce.” — Cathy Jacobson*

For better or worse, COVID-19 forced hospitals to think creatively in the midst of almost inconceivable chaos. Consequently, the post-pandemic world has come to expect even more cutting-edge solutions that lead to better care and — perhaps most importantly — convenience.

Though innovation is often viewed through the lens of lab-based ingenuity, healthcare plays host to a bevy of frontiers just waiting to be explored (and transformed) including artificial intelligence, data and analytics, and entirely new ways of engaging patients and staff. Add to that the potential for partnering with industry disruptors, and the future feels limitless, especially when it comes to solving healthcare’s toughest challenges.

Take, for instance, Wisconsin-based Froedtert Health, which in collaboration with the Medical College of Wisconsin created the subsidiary Inception Health to improve outcomes for individuals and communities through the use of digital technology. Froedtert Health draws on the expertise of Inception Health’s clinicians, engineers and healthcare professionals to link consumer needs with leading-edge solutions and deploy them across academic and community healthcare networks.

“It is a very deliberate move to change the way we do things,” said Cathy Jacobson, CEO of Froedtert ThedaCare Health. “It’s about changing the way we work, adapting and adopting technology in a different way, and moving the organization to a ‘right care, right time, right place’ mindset of population health.”

### How can you encourage innovation throughout your organization?

- **Build strategic partnerships that spark innovative ideas.** All five CEOs discussed the importance of collaborating with industry, community partners, local philanthropists and Vizient to boost performance and patient outcomes. For example, Endeavor Health formed an operational team inclusive of Vizient experts to identify, implement and measure systemwide improvements. The team — and peer-to-peer networking — allows Endeavor Health leadership to share challenges and develop a structure and approach for continuous progress.
- **Focus on digital innovation and care delivery innovation, such as using AI-powered predictive analytics to improve outcomes.** UCLA Health, for instance, is engaged in a project that analyzes the longitudinal data on surgeries with anesthesia complications to determine which elements predict potential complications.
- **Look at the ways technology can reduce burden on the healthcare workforce.** From virtual nursing programs to AI that can more quickly process and understand a patient’s electronic medical record, true innovation means employees are operating at top of license. Houston Methodist draws on digital advancements through its Institute for Technology, Innovation & Education, which uses a virtual hospital model to provide hands-on clinical training for healthcare professionals who want to acquire new proficiencies.
- **Think creatively about streamlining your processes.** For example, Mary Washington Healthcare eliminated “white space” during inpatient visits (a solution spurred by workforce constraints). Reducing non-value-added waiting time allowed for faster patient care with the same number of professionals.
- **Don’t tolerate complacency. Institutions that are not actively thinking about new solutions will undoubtedly find themselves behind the curve.** Innovation must be ingrained in your organizational DNA. Eliminate the phrase “but we’ve always done it this way.”

## Create equitable access to care

*“That mission to improve the health of the community is what resonates most with our staff. It makes them feel like they’re making a difference every day in the work that they do.” — Johnese Spisso*

You have to meet your community’s most vulnerable where they are — and not just in the figurative sense. The reality is that those who need you most may not have the means for consistent care, which is why health equity means more than just thinking outside the box.

It means thinking outside the walls of your organization and removing barriers to accessing care.

In fact, that boots-on-the-ground approach is key to initiatives like UCLA Health’s Homeless Healthcare Collaboration, a mobile primary care clinic that visits encampments throughout Los Angeles. Each van is staffed with a physician, nurse, social worker and mental health practitioner who provide healthcare services to unhoused individuals. The program addresses the barriers that vulnerable populations often face in accessing care, which has led to a whopping 32% reduction in emergency department (ED) visits in this patient population.

“Over 60,000 people in Los Angeles experience homelessness every day,” said Johnese Spisso, president of UCLA Health and CEO of UCLA Hospital System. “A couple of years ago, we noticed these individuals comprised a large percentage of ED visits even though they could have been treated in a clinic setting. You have to consider new and innovative ways to address your biggest challenges.”

## What are some strategies to better health equity in your community?

- **Identify the social determinants of health that most affect the communities you serve.** Tools like the patent pending Vizion Vulnerability Index™ — which identifies nine social needs domains and obstacles to care in neighborhoods that may influence a person’s overall health — ensure you focus your efforts on the social determinants of health that are most critical to your community. The index values are location appropriate, which allows for variation in the weighting of the domains across different geographic areas.
- **Partnerships, including philanthropic and community investment funding, can provide avenues to create and sustain health equity initiatives.** In its first year, UCLA Health’s homeless outreach program was funded by local philanthropists (federal grants now sustain the initiative), and Froedtert Health has formed partnerships with Federally Qualified Health Centers in Milwaukee to address healthcare shortages in the inner city.
- **Build health equity into your organizational goals and use data to identify and prioritize your efforts.** For instance, Endeavor Health used the ODB to determine and finalize two goals for 2024 around hypertension and breast cancer screenings in underserved populations. Additionally, the system collects data on race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation and gender to better understand its patient populations and identify disparities.
- **Recruit and retain talent that knows and understands the needs of your specific patient populations.** Mary Washington Healthcare recently launched its first internal medicine and family practice residencies with the goal of encouraging residents to practice in the Fredericksburg, Va. community as a way to improve patient outreach and access to care.





## Build a dynamic internal culture

*“You have to get the culture right to get everything else.” — Dr. Marc Boom*

Whether you prefer to call it the foundation, nucleus or heart of high performance, internal culture is at the core of everything your organization can, and will, accomplish.

It’s something Houston Methodist has long known, and that deceptively simple concept has proven a catalyst in propelling every hospital in its system to peak performance.

“You have to be intentional about creating a culture you want and driving out aspects of a culture you don’t want,” said Dr. Marc Boom, president and CEO of Houston Methodist. “Frankly, that’s the Board’s and my No. 1 job. Because if you get that right, and then combine it with a direction and a vision, you can make magic happen.”

For Houston Methodist, much of that magic is conjured through the art of storytelling. Each year, the system hosts a session called “Pathway to Unparalleled,” where all employees come together to discuss what it means to be unparalleled in a particular facet of healthcare. For example, in 2019 the focus was innovation; in 2023, it was safety.

But no matter the topic, the goal is for staff to verbalize how they bring those tenets to life.

“It’s about educating people and tugging at their heartstrings,” said Dr. Boom, who noted that internal and external storytelling helps convey the organization’s values and the role each employee plays in achieving the desired outcomes. “Sharing stories and highlighting the impact of the work creates a sense of purpose and connection among everyone in the system.”

## What are other ways to inspire strong internal culture?

- **Promote open communication — and let your employees know it’s OK to broach tough topics.** Understand it may take time to build that level of trust, but by consistently encouraging employees to voice their opinions, share new ideas and provide feedback without fear of retribution, you can create an open and honest culture where problems are quickly and efficiently addressed.
- **Embrace consistency and authenticity.** Every decision you make should align with the culture you are working to build. And your actions must match your words; otherwise, trust will quickly shatter.
- **Prioritize wellness, engagement and belonging.** This ensures employees know their role in shaping the organization is valued — and so are they.
- **Emphasize resilience and a growth mindset.** Help your staff see that failures and setbacks are opportunities for learning and improvement.
- **Build relationships with employees at all levels of the organization.** Make yourself approachable and available to address any concerns or problems.
- **Set clear performance expectations and provide incentives.** By doing so, you foster a culture of continuous improvement. For instance, Froedtert Health emphasizes the importance of embedding accountability throughout the organization, starting with painting a clear picture of the system’s “why” and its vision for excellence.
- **Clearly model your system’s values.** This was a particular point of emphasis for each CEO. “Credibility and trust are your currency in the organization,” Dr. McDermott said. “You have to live your values every single day.”

## Methodology

This report was created through the analysis of individual interviews of CEOs from five unique health systems. The selection of these interviewees was determined through an evaluation of health systems actively participating in multiple collaborative projects and networking offerings, integration of data into their continuous performance improvement efforts and recognition among their peers. The invited participants represent the breadth of healthcare operating models and university (non)affiliation.

### Contributors include:

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