

THE “ITS” OF EXCEPTIONAL SERVICE

Training alone won't create a service-driven organization — so let's explore what actually will.

The Misunderstanding About Service Excellence

Most healthcare organizations believe that improving service means providing customer service training — especially for frontline staff.

And while training is important... it is **not sufficient**.

Organizations that rely only on training often experience:

- Short-term improvements that fade over time
- Inconsistent behaviors across departments
- Frustration that “we've already tried this before”

Because the truth is:

“Training for IT” is just one of many “ITs” required to achieve and sustain service excellence.

After decades of working with hospitals and healthcare organizations to improve the patient experience, employee engagement, and overall performance, we've learned something critical:

**Exceptional service is not created by training alone.
It is created by systems.**

And there is another critical truth that high-performing organizations understand:

**You cannot improve the patient experience
without improving the employee experience in parallel.**

Service excellence is delivered by people — and when employees are:

- unclear on expectations
- inconsistently supported
- or disengaged from the work

the patient experience will reflect it.

This is why service excellence is not just a “service initiative.”

It is a people + system outcome.

Organizations that achieve **lasting results** take a broader, more intentional approach, which is the focus of this Whitepaper.

The “ITs” of Exceptional Service

To create a culture where service excellence is consistent, reliable, and sustainable, organizations must activate multiple, reinforcing elements — what we refer to as **“The ITs.”**

1. Set Standards for IT

Make expectations visible, specific, and actionable

Many organizations have service standards — but they are often:

- Buried in policies
- Inconsistently understood
- Rarely used to guide daily behavior

Exceptional organizations do something different:

- They define **clear, observable behaviors**
- They make standards **visible and lived — not just documented**
- They involve employees in **creating or refining the standards**

Examples:

- “Walk people where they need to go”
- “Answer calls within three rings using a standard greeting”

Bringing this IT alive:

- Integrating standards into **daily huddles, rounding, and coaching**
- Requiring **pre-hire commitment to standards**
- Keeping the standards “top of mind” through **frequent and memorable campaigns.**

2. Hire for IT

Select for service mindset — not just skillset

Too often, organizations:

Hire for skill... and hope to train for service.

High-performing organizations reverse this:

- They **hire for attitude, empathy, and service orientation**
- They **train for the technical skills for the role**

Bring this IT alive:

- Using service-focused hiring criteria with a corresponding applicant pre-screening tool
- Asking behavioral-based interview questions (optimally with employees involved in the panel interviews)
- Setting the organization's service expectations throughout the selection process, not just after hiring

3. Train to IT

Build confidence through practice — not just information

Training still matters — but how you train matters more.

Effective service training includes:

- Real-life scenarios
- Role-playing and simulation
- Storytelling and shared experiences

Practice doesn't make perfect — it makes permanent.

Bringing this IT alive:

- Empowering an employee-driven training process (by employees, for employees) that increases the receptivity for what is being taught.
- Shifting from "one-and-done training" to **a systematic cadence of ongoing training** (we can never be done training and retraining on high priority goals such as exceptional service).
- Planning not just what happens DURING each training, but what happens BEFORE and AFTER each training to support that employees are equipped and inspired to put into practice what they learned.
- Leaders knowing specifically what their role is in supporting their employees in applying what they have learned.

4. Validate & Verify IT

Ensure expectations are actually happening

What leaders tolerate becomes the culture.

Organizations must actively confirm:

- Are standards being followed?
- Are the standards leading to the intended and optimal outcomes?
- Where are gaps or barriers?

Key methods:

- Leader rounding with patients and employees.
- Direct observation
- Use of operational data (when available)

What you accept is what you teach.

What you permit, you promote.

Bringing this IT alive:

- Using **structured leader rounding tools**
- Capturing and **sharing validation insights** across teams and leaders
- **Close the loop** on identified issues, gaps, or barriers
- **Coaching and feedback in real time** (Validation-Feedback Loop)

5. Model IT

Leadership behavior sets the ceiling for the organization; this includes the employees that are serving on any service-excellence or patient-experience teams -- these employees are also leaders in service excellence.

Leaders — formal and informal — must:

- Consistently demonstrate service standards
- Be visible examples of expected behaviors

Because:

If formal and informal leaders don't model it, employees won't sustain it (or even strive to learn and apply it).

Moments of modeling are powerful:

- Helping a lost patient
- Demonstrating respect under pressure
- Prioritizing service even when busy

Bringing this IT alive:

- Make modeling an **explicit leadership expectation**
- Including it in formal leadership evaluations and monthly accountability meetings
- Including it in formal quarterly check-ins for service-related improvement team members
- Sharing visible stories of formal and informal leaders "living the standards"

6. Measure IT & Set Goals for IT

What gets measured improves.

Without measurement:

- Progress is subjective
- Misperceptions persist
- Improvement stalls

Organizations committed to service excellence:

- Use **reliable and consistent measurement systems** so that trends over time can be identified
- Set **clear, metric-based goals**
- Align goals across the organization

Example:

- Improve patient experience scores by X%
- Increase likelihood-to-recommend metrics by Y%
- Improve responsiveness or communication measures by Z%

Bringing this IT alive:

- Integrating service metrics into your **Goal Cycle (aka "ACHIEVE system")**
- Aligning department and individual goals with applicable organizational targets
- Using data to drive improvement — not overwhelm or punish

7. Evaluate for IT

Align accountability with what matters most

Performance evaluations should reinforce priorities.

Leading organizations tie formal evaluations to:

- Behavior standards
- Job performance
- Department goals
- Organizational goals

This creates:

- Alignment of individual behavior and performance to something bigger and broader
- Shared ownership
- Cross-functional teamwork

Bringing this IT alive:

- Increasing employee and leader evaluation "weight" (importance, scoring, emphasis) on **team and organizational outcomes**
- Reducing over-reliance on subjective evaluations
- Using an evaluation tool that reinforces: "We succeed together"

8. Lead IT

The CEO sets the tone — and the priority

There is no substitute for the executive leadership commitment.

When service is truly a priority:

- Executives talk about it consistently
- Executives show up visibly
- Executives reinforce it in multiple ways

Bringing this IT alive:

- Keeping to a consistent cadence of transparently sharing stories and service results in ways that are understandable and useful, including a standing topic at quarterly CEO-Employee Forums
- Empowerment of all leaders and employee-driven teams to set and achieve goals and high standards for service excellence
- Aligning resources (time, budget) for service improvements

If leaders don't treat service as a top strategy, others in the organization won't either.

9. Celebrate IT

What gets recognized gets repeated.

Recognition fuels culture.

High-performing organizations:

- Recognize service behaviors frequently
- Maintain a strong **positive-to-corrective feedback ratio (3:1)**
- Celebrate both:
 - Results
 - The meaning behind the results

Examples:

- Employee recognition programs
- Patient feedback recognition
- Team-based celebrations

Bringing this IT alive:

- Using systematic approaches for recognizing great service by patients, leaders, and peer-to-peer.
- Tying recognition to **specific standards**.
- Celebrating improvement and progress, not only just measurable goal attainment.

Bringing It All Together - From “Training for IT” → to “Building the System for IT”

Historically, we’ve described the key components of service excellence as “The ITs.”

Yet, over time through our partnership with dozens of healthcare organizations, we have expanded that thinking:

The ITs only produce results when they are embedded within systems.

At Capstone, we have evolved to help organizations operationalize service excellence (as well as other top strategic priorities such as quality and safety, workplace excellence, growth initiatives, and financial improvements) through the building, connecting, and optimization of four systems:

- **The Team System** – how employees are engaged, aligned, and activated as key contributors in organization-wide top strategic priorities
- **The Leadership System** – how leaders consistently lead to reinforce high standards and achieve goals
- **The Change System** – how improvements are successfully implemented and sustained
- **The Achieve System** – how highly aligned goals are set, measured, and accomplished throughout the entire organization

The connection between the ITs and the four systems:

The “IT”	Capstone System Alignment	What It Drives
Set Standards for IT	Leadership System + Team System	Clarity and consistency
Hire for IT	Leadership System	Right people, right behaviors
Train to IT	Leadership System + Team System	Capability and confidence
Validate & Verify IT	Change System	Accountability and follow-through
Model IT	Leadership System + Team System	Cultural reinforcement
Measure IT	Achieve System + Change System	Focus and visibility
Evaluate for IT	Leadership System	Alignment and ownership
Lead IT	Leadership System + Team System	Priority and energy
Celebrate IT	Leadership System + Team System	Engagement and sustainability

Why Organizations Get Stuck (and How to Move Forward)

Many organizations have implemented some of the ITs:

- They've done training
- They have standards
- They measure experience

Yet they still feel:

- Inconsistent execution
- Reliance on a few individuals
- Limited or unsustained results

This is not a people problem. **It is a system gap.**

The Shift to Organizational Vitality

Service excellence is not the end goal — it is part of something bigger: **Organizational Vitality.**

Hallmarks of Organizational Vitality include the abilities to:

- Attract and retain talent
- Earn patient trust
- Execute strategy effectively
- Adapt to change
- Maintain financial strength

And they can do this because:

Their systems are aligned — not fragmented.

And at the center of organizational vitality is a critical connection:

A strong employee experience enables a strong patient experience.

Organizations that excel in service are not just focused on the patient — they are equally focused on:

- Equipping their employees
- Engaging their teams
- And building systems that support both

Bringing It All Together

The ITs matter.

But they only work when supported by:

- An effective and synergistic leadership team (The LEAD System)
- Activated employee-driven team contributions (The TEAM System)
- Structured improvement processes (The CHANGE System)
- Clear goals and accountability (The ACHIEVE System)

The systems provide the mechanism and momentum for continuous improvements and growth, including the achievement of excellence in service delivery.

Final Thought

If your organization has been “training for IT” but not seeing lasting results...

It may not be a training issue.

It may be time to build the systems that make excellence consistent.

About Capstone Leadership Solutions

Capstone partners with healthcare organizations to build the systems that drive long term organizational vitality, guiding them to become the employer- and provider-of-choice to keep care local and margins strong.

QR CODES/LINKS FOR RESOURCES:

We believe in the power of collaboration, we have a few spaces where we can stay connected:



CAPSTONE EMAIL NEWSLETTER

Our email newsletter is full of valuable content to help healthcare organizations grow from good to great to even greater.



PODCAST – Culture Change RX

Weekly episodes where we dissect the driving force behind every thriving organization: its culture!



FANS OF THE FRAMEWORK – Private Facebook Group

We invite you to [join our private Facebook group](#) to access posted videos, curated articles, and resources, and to connect with other healthcare leaders to exchange ideas, network, and share ideas - working toward positive change in healthcare.