

# Capitalizing on Change at Yukon Hospital Corporation

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*This is the third article in our Lab Wisely series that explores experiences of medical laboratory professionals across Canada as they participate in initiatives to improve the utilization of health care resources. We talked with Sheri-Lynn Heighington, former core lab lead supervisor and interim manager at Yukon Hospital Corporation (YHC) to learn about two specific projects undertaken by YHC and the efforts made to build and sustain a culture of teamwork.*



Change is difficult. It forces us to break old habits and learn new ones, which can be uncomfortable. The medical laboratory is characterized by rapid change, perhaps more so than many other areas in health care, and the staff at YHC are no strangers to this concept. YHC has undergone some sweeping changes in recent years, from updating physical spaces to improving quality of lab results. However, YHC staff went beyond simply making these changes to implementing some great strategies to help staff adjust to change. Sheri-Lynn's experience within these processes highlights the importance of working on teamwork and trust amidst an ever-changing environment.

### PROJECT #1: A NEW EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT

After years of planning, construction of a new Emergency Department (ED) at the Whitehorse General Hospital was completed in 2018. Hospital staff saw the new and updated space as an opportunity to improve on past processes and flows, including optimizing laboratory test utilization. To examine this opportunity further, staff formed a committee which included the lab quality manager, the laboratory information system (LIS) specialists, lead medical laboratory technologist (MLT), physicians from both the ED and the operating rooms, and administrative staff. Per the committee's recommendations, ordering panels were adjusted to improve utilization and efficiency. For example, Urine Drug of Abuse screen was added to the ED Coma panel orders to ensure comprehensive and coordinated lab testing for this patient population. Additional standardized mass transfusion protocol panels were created to support subsequent orders. These changes were a result of consultation with affected stakeholders with a view to improving patient care while ensuring appropriateness of ordering practices.

The newly built ED also led to another opportunity: What could happen with the old space? The ultimate decision was to redevelop the space to be a new outpatient laboratory, so a redevelopment committee was formed. Laboratory staff were engaged and participated on this committee to provide input on the functional flow and layout of the space. They made a commitment to improve patient experience in privacy and confidentiality, efficiency and infection prevention and control. Laboratory staff were given the opportunity to tour other outpatient laboratories to observe examples of workflow possibilities. Their input directly shaped the new design. Engaging with staff early in the process amplified a sense of ownership and investment in the project; they were able to enjoy their new space and take pride and credit for their participation in making it all happen.

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### PROJECT #2: IMPROVING MICROBIOLOGY TESTING QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Rapid changes in microbiology technology and standards coupled with relatively low sample volumes meant that YHC, like many smaller laboratories, struggled with sustaining high-quality microbiology services. A multidisciplinary team was assembled to explore options for improvement. The team consisted of medical directors, local hospital administration, the laboratory manager, the Quality MLT, hospital information system staff and physicians. After multiple meetings, the team made the decision to consolidate microbiology testing to YHC's laboratory services partner in Vancouver, British Columbia. Working out the logistics

took many months of regular meetings, exploring different transportation options and planning for staff retraining. Finally, the YHC team was ready for their multi-phased project launch.

### THE GOOD

To ensure the project was a success, the team developed an ambitious implementation plan to monitor the move of microbiology tests. Turnaround time, cost-effectiveness, and other quality indicators were measured every 30 days. These metrics were reviewed regularly, and plans were adapted for continuous improvement. A major hurdle to overcome was the communication of laboratory results. At first, there was no direct information system link between Yukon and British Columbia. Results needed to be uploaded from Vancouver to local Yukon servers or faxed. They experienced delays when results would occasionally get stuck in middleware. Eventually, all the kinks were ironed out for a new shared laboratory information system, and results were available in real time. Four months into the project, they achieved one of their primary goals: to ensure that the turnaround times were just as good as before, or better. An outcome worth celebrating was their ability to consolidate their microbiology testing without losing any staff positions within the laboratory.

There were other positive changes, such as an increase in testing from rural sites. Physicians always had access to testing but would often experience delays receiving results. In the past, physicians were frequently asked to resubmit the sample because it was no longer viable once it got to the laboratory. However, the new sample format for send-out testing in Vancouver was considerably more stable. Once testing was moved to British Columbia and physicians started receiving quality results in good time, they

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were able to treat their patients more effectively. While improved microbiology test utilization was not the primary driver of this project, it was another important outcome.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

By all accounts, this was a successful project that continues to benefit patient care. Unfortunately, communication and engagement with the laboratory staff did not occur as planned, which ultimately resulted in significant loss of trust. Information about the potential change ended up in the public domain before any decisions were made. Some staff did not support the change, further complicating the situation and making it more difficult for YHC to effectively address the team. In the end, the laboratory staff were engaged as planned and their input was used in assessing options. However, by this time the damage had been done. Trust was broken and it would take a great deal of time and effort on everyone's part to rebuild.

### REGAINING TRUST

An integral step toward regaining trust was the recruitment of an independent team engagement consultant. She met with each staff member individually to hear their concerns and met with the entire team to create a strategic plan focused on improving morale and teamwork. To complement this work, project and laboratory leadership focused on maintaining a bidirectional flow of information. They set consistent and structured all-staff meetings and supportive team-building events. An early challenge in the project was staff scheduling and task changes. Working together, solutions were found to alleviate the scheduling pressures and challenges. Another outcome was the creation of training documents and new work distribution plans. MLT and medical laboratory assistant (MLA) participation was needed for these accomplishments, but because of the initial lack of trust, outcomes like these were delayed and more contentious than originally anticipated. Sheri-Lynn admits that there is still a way to go on the path to regaining trust, but the new laboratory leadership remains committed to transparency and teamwork.

### INVESTING IN TEAM-BUILDING

The microbiology lab project revealed existing deficiencies in the team environment. The challenges experienced prompted leadership to find ways to foster a change-ready mindset and cultivate a well-functioning team. As part of this plan, they encouraged individual accountability for creating a positive working environment, since bottom-up approaches enhance buy-in and sustainability. Another part was demonstrating investment in this goal by contracting an independent consultant to support their recommendations. Team-building is not a single event. It's a continuous improvement strategy that can reap many rewards when it's woven into the fabric of an organization.

### ADVICE FOR MLTs AND MLAs

There are lessons from this story for multiple levels of laboratory staff. Managers and supervisors should be aware of the ramifications of delayed staff engagement and fulsome communication. In the first project, staff engagement and change management went relatively smoothly. In the second project, there were a few bumps. It was vital to get input from microbiology staff to design a new way of handling the limited amount of testing that was still required on site, like STAT gram stains or *C. difficile* identification. The project team also needed to understand the new needs of the core lab where there would be more events during the day. If seeking this input comes too late, even inadvertently, it can be an uphill battle to obtain. Sheri-Lynn

emphasized that communication that keeps everyone in the loop is vital, as is having a plan ready to be able to nimbly react if this is disrupted.

For bench-level MLTs and MLAs, an openness to change, and being an active partner in change, is important. However, when change comes unexpectedly, it's much more difficult to handle. Naturally, it can feel like trust is broken. In these situations, trying to understand all perspectives and being willing to ask questions goes a long way. Starting with the assumption that people try to do their best is sage advice in many circumstances, including here. Although it can be difficult, focusing on the positive aspects of the change can help with a sense of willingness to work together. For all levels of laboratory staff, exerting effort to maintain teamwork and collegiality can help create resilience in challenging times.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

No matter the size of a change management project, early, regular, intentional and transparent communications are paramount. Positive change starts with each individual and has the power to transform entire systems – as seen in the YHC laboratory. Despite some significant changes in recent years, the YHC laboratory is now a more engaged department, where ideas are exchanged fluidly, they celebrate their successes and laughter and trust fill the space. As a group, they are better equipped to deal with the inevitable changes that are a part of health care, and, as a result, are resetting the bar for other laboratories and hospital departments. ■



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