



# Breaking the Rules for Better Care

Resource Guide  
[ihi.org](http://ihi.org)

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# An Invitation



# An Invitation to Break the Rules

Dear Colleagues,

We are thrilled that your organization will be joining changing agents from all over the world to participate in a global effort to “Breaking the Rules for Better Care.”

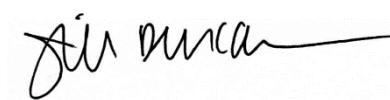
You are setting a powerful example for your staff and the health care community at large by embracing the principles of radical redesign and continually seeking to improve the experiences of our patients and staff. We know these efforts will be illuminating, inspiring, and impactful. The actions taken as a result of this initiative by your individual organizations have the potential to profoundly enhance the experiences of our patients, their families, community members, and our staff over the weeks, months, and years ahead. We are grateful to be a part of such an impressive and brave community of improvers.

More helpful resources can be found on [our website](#). And don't forget to share your efforts on social media using the hashtag #IHIBreakingTheRules. Should you have any questions or if we can be of any support, please do not hesitate to reach out to our [IHI Alliance Team](#).

Sincerely,



Don Berwick, MD, MPP, FRCP  
President Emeritus and Senior Fellow  
Institute for Healthcare Improvement



Jill Duncan, RN, MS, MPH  
Vice President  
Institute for Healthcare Improvement



# Getting Started



# What Is “Breaking the Rules for Better Care”?

“Breaking the Rules for Better Care” was developed and initiated by the IHI Leadership Alliance in 2016 as a way to identify health care “rules” that get in the way of the care experience. As health care leaders, we aim to provide positive experiences for patients, families, and staff. However, sometimes we may inadvertently create processes or policies that have an unintended impact on the people we work to serve and support. In 2017, 10 members of the [IHI Health Improvement Alliance Europe](#) (HIAE) conducted their own “Breaking the Rules for Better Care” week, amassing 500 proposed rules by means of feedback boxes in cafeterias, postcards, stickers, comment boards, and staff brainstorming sessions. One organization even ran an underground “guerilla campaign,” covering its hallways and doorways with red masking tape to illustrate “breaking the rules” in action. To view the existing system with a new lens, organizations from these two IHI networks have been asking: *If you could break or change one rule in service of a better care experience for patients or staff, what would it be and why?*

In February 2023, the IHI Leadership Alliance, IHI Healthcare Improvement Alliance Europe, and global members led the third iteration of the “Breaking the Rules for Better Care” initiative. Over 100 organizations participated in the Breaking the Rules for Better Care coalition, and in one week over 1200 rules were identified. Our collective efforts allowed redesigning, reimagining to thrive. If we get it right, our work to remove barriers, improve patient and staff engagement, and innovate in system improvement will be an oasis for some, and the spark many of us need for the work ahead.

IHI has prepared this resource guide to help your organization get started with similar “Breaking the Rules” efforts.

## Step 1: Plan Your Participation

Consider participating as one team, one unit, one floor, one facility, or as a whole organization. We’d recommend having a focused time period for your efforts, such as one week or one day.

## Step 2: Share

To get the word out about “Breaking the Rules for Better Care” and engage your staff, you can:

- [Share your participation](#) on social media and connect with others using the hashtag #IHIBreakingTheRules
- Include a sample [announcement](#) in an upcoming staff email or newsletter (page 12)
- Educate your colleagues with these [talking points](#) (page 13)
- Ask patients, their families, and staff these [sample questions](#) (page 14)
- Create a [template](#) to record suggestions for rules to break or change (page 15)

- Review IHI’s [New Rules for Radical Redesign](#) to get your staff thinking creatively about care redesign
- Read the JAMA Viewpoint article “[Breaking the Rules for Better Care](#)”

Encourage members to have fun, including visual tools to indicate participation. For example, IHI distributed [stickers](#) to participating organizations. Others have taken advantage of common areas like waiting rooms, staff break areas, and entrance spaces to query in person or collect asynchronous feedback.



## Step 3: Mobilize

### Who do you want to ask?

Decide who from your organization you would like to participate. You can engage on whatever scale makes sense to you, whether that means asking only staff, only patients, or asking a small team to participate (versus requesting that the organization at large contribute). At this time, it will also be important to decide how and when you will communicate the outputs and potential next steps to those who participated. (Suggestions for communication are included below.)

### How will you ask?

Decide on the most effective method to collect suggestions from patients, families, and staff at your organization. Some suggested approaches include:

- **In person:** Consider asking in waiting rooms, break rooms, or during team meetings.
- **Huddles or other daily management tools:** Create simple scripts that could be leveraged in daily management systems.
- **Email:** Email your staff and ask that they send you their suggestions for what rules they would break or change and why.
- **Survey:** Create a simple survey using an online survey tool. This may be the best approach if you think anonymity will be important.
- **QR codes:** Create asynchronous methods for patients, families, and your teams to submit ideas and insights using simple scanning technologies from various entry or exit points, or high flow spaces throughout your organization to link to a simple data repository.

## What will you ask?

We recommend asking staff, patients, and their families: *If you could break or change one rule in service of a better care experience for patients or staff, what would it be and why?* or refer to this [list](#) for some alternative questions.

## What will you do with the suggestions you receive?

This is perhaps one of the most important steps for your preparation: How will you respond to what you learn? Staff, patients, and colleagues will be eager to understand what your leadership team does with the information they share. They might also be curious to understand how and when they can help.

- **How to collect suggestions:**

Create a simple [template](#) that works for you to record and categorize the suggestions you receive. One Leadership Alliance member found it helpful to recruit health professional students to populate the template.

Based on the experiences of our early adopters, the suggestions and potential actions will likely fall into three categories (see table on the next page).

- **Inform staff how you will follow up:**

When you start collecting suggestions, let participants know how you will follow up with them after they submit their ideas. For example:

*“Our organization aims to collect X (number) suggestions and will report back to you on our plans to take action by Y (date). The suggestions we receive will be used to improve care at our organization as well as generate a national dialogue about rules that get in the way of delivering better care.”*

Don't forget to thank participants for contributing to this effort!



Category	Definition	Potential Action	Example
<p>Rules that need clarity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Myths</b> that are perceived to be rules.</li> <li>• <b>Habits</b> that reflect "the ways we do things around here".</li> <li>• Unclear based on interpretation of policies, regulations, or the influence of local culture.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debunk organizational myths</li> <li>• Tie the rationale back to the rule</li> <li>• Seek clarification from the entities that put in place the rules (e.g., communicating with the US Department of Health &amp; Human Services about HIPAA)</li> </ul>	<p>One organization consulted their local Board of Pharmacy about regulations preventing sending patients home with the medications they had been using during their stay in the hospital. They discovered that, in fact, if inpatient pharmacists relabeled those medications, they were able to send them home safely with patients, thus preventing waste.</p>
<p>Rules that need redesign</p>	<p><b>Administrative rules</b> that we, as leaders, have the power to change.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select rules to revise</li> <li>• Connect with colleagues through professional associations or other affiliations about how they may have tackled similar challenges</li> </ul>	<p>An organization realized that partners in the family birthing center were hungry after long hours waiting for mothers to deliver. Staff suggested the idea to redesign the rules and provide food to "feed all the partners" in the birthing center.</p>
<p>Rules that need advocacy</p>	<p>Rules that are in place due to <b>regulations or policies</b> beyond organizational control</p>	<p>Either independently or with professional networks, use the power of collective voice to engage the appropriate entities and advocate for rules to be changed</p>	<p>During the Leadership Alliance's "Breaking the Rules for Better Care" Week, many organizations identified wanting to eliminate the CMS 3-day rule, requiring a patient to spend 3 consecutive days as an inpatient in a hospital to qualify for Medicare coverage of a skilled nursing facility. Alliance members spoke directly with representatives from CMS at an in-person meeting about the 3-day rule to advocate for change.</p>

## Step 4: Take Action and Report Back

After sorting the submissions using the three categories of rules and surfacing the themes (myths, habits, administrative rules, and-or policy/regulatory), determine with your staff and patients what action you will take. We are thrilled that you are taking part in this effort, and we are excited to hear more about your experiences and findings.

The IHI team is eager to learn from your experiences so that we can celebrate your efforts as well as help other Rule Breakers around the world based on what you learned. We invite you to complete this [short survey](#) to share any ideas, insights, and data from your local “Breaking the Rules” iteration.

Thank you for your partnership in Breaking the Rules for Better Care. Additional questions about Breaking the Rules for Better Care can be directed to [IHIAllianceTeam@ihi.org](mailto:IHIAllianceTeam@ihi.org).

If you are interested in learning more about the Leadership Alliance, please contact the IHI Alliance Team at [IHIAllianceTeam@ihi.org](mailto:IHIAllianceTeam@ihi.org).

If you are interested in learning more about the Health Improvement Alliance Europe, please contact the HIAE Team at [europeteam@ihi.org](mailto:europeteam@ihi.org).

# Resources



## Resources

### Sample Email/Newsletter Announcement Text

*Feel free to modify the following announcement to raise awareness within your organization about “Breaking the Rules for Better Care.”*

[Your organization name] is proud to announce that we are engaging in an effort to provide a better care experience for patients, families, and staff by participating in “Breaking the Rules for Better Care” Week [or another timeframe] on [insert dates here].

As an organization, we aim to provide positive experiences for patients, families, and staff. However, sometimes we inadvertently create processes or policies that have an unintended impact on the people we work to serve and support. To view the existing system through a new lens, for one week [or another timeframe] we will encourage our patients, families, and staff to answer the question: **If you could break or change one rule in service of a better care experience for patients or staff, what would it be and why?**

The suggestions we receive will be used to improve care at our organization [insert other actions, as needed].

[Insert how here]

For more information, or to learn how to share your idea(s) for a rule you would like to see changed, please email [insert contact person here].

Sincerely,

[Insert names]

## Talking Points

*Modify and utilize this page as a reference guide to share information and answer any questions your staff may have about “Breaking the Rules for Better Care” efforts.*

**What is “Breaking the Rules for Better Care” Week?** “Breaking the Rules for Better Care” Week was developed and led by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) [Leadership Alliance](#). The initial week-long event took place in 2016 and challenged health systems to identify the rules, habits, policies, or procedures that may get in the way of positive experiences for our staff and patients.

For one week, Alliance members asked their patients, their families, and our staff: *If you could break or change one rule in service of better care for patients or staff, what would it be and why?*

**How do I suggest a rule I’d like to break or change?** *[Modify based on how you decide to collect suggestions.]*

**What will happen with the rules once we submit them?** We will work to categorize your submissions and take action as follows: *[Modify based on how you decide to take action.]*

Category	Definition	Potential Action
Rules that need clarity	<p><b>Myths</b> that are perceived to be rules.</p> <p><b>Habits</b> that reflect “the ways we do things around here”.</p> <p>Unclear based on interpretation of policies, regulations, or the influence of local culture.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debunk organizational myths</li> <li>• Tie the rationale back to the rule</li> <li>• Seek clarification from the entities that put them in place (e.g., HIPAA)</li> </ul>
Rules that need redesign	<p><b>Administrative rules</b> that we, as leaders, have the power to change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select rules to revise and redesign</li> <li>• Connect with colleagues through professional associations/affiliations about how to advance forward</li> </ul>
Rules that need advocacy	<p>Rules that are in place due to <b>regulations or policies</b> beyond organizational control</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Either independently or through professional networks, use the power of collective voice to engage the appropriate entities and advocate for rules to be changed</li> </ul>

**What is the IHI Leadership Alliance?** The [IHI Leadership Alliance](#), a dynamic collaboration of leaders from health systems across North America, is united by a common mission: to work with one another – and in partnership with our patients, workforces, and communities – to deliver on the full promise of the IHI Triple Aim. The Alliance is a learning community characterized by courage, creativity, and a commitment to champion the [radical redesign of health care](#). The Alliance gives members access to experts across the country, provides opportunity to collaborate and innovate with leading thinkers, and advances a collective voice to guide change for national impact.

**What is the IHI Health Improvement Alliance Europe?** The [Health Improvement Alliance Europe \(HIAE\)](#), representing a diverse group of leaders from across Europe, is a community of colleagues working to co-create systematic improvements in conjunction with the staff and users in our regions to achieve health and well-being better than we've ever seen, care better than we've ever known, at a cost we can all afford with every person every time.

## Sample Questions

*Use the following questions as a guide for how to ask patients, their families, and staff about the rules they would like to break or change.*

Original Question:

**If you could break or change one rule in service of a better care experience for patients or staff, what would it be and why?**

Alternative Options:

- “What would you like to see us do differently?”
- “What would you change to provide a better experience for patients and/or staff at [Name of Organization]?”
- “What is one wish you would make to deliver better care for patients or staff?”
- (For patients/families) “Is there anything our organization has done during your stay that has gotten in the way of your family member’s care?”
- (For patients) “What do we do routinely that has made things more challenging for you?”

## Sample Template

Use the following template to record the rules that patients, their families, and staff would like to break or change. We recommend having one point person on your team collect and code the information.

Download [the Breaking the Rules for Better Care collection tool](#) to capture and categorize ideas, insights, and data.

Date	Unit/Dept/Team	Employee/Patient/ Relationship to Patient	What Rule Would You Break or Improve?	Why Break or Change This Rule?	Type of Rule
					Rule that needs redesign
					Rule that needs clarity
					Rule that needs advocacy