

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: USING THE SCHWARTZ ROUNDS® PROGRAM TO BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL

### INTRODUCTION

The Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare hosted an inspirational evening featuring Dr. Tom Lee, chief medical officer at Press Ganey and author of “Social Capital in Healthcare.” Dr. Lee described how social capital, defined as networks of relationships characterized by trust, shared values, and mutual support, is the foundation of compassionate healthcare delivery.

### SOCIAL CAPITAL IN HEALTHCARE

Dr. Lee spoke about how he was inspired to write about social capital in healthcare by Robert Putnam’s seminal work “Bowling Alone,” which documented the decline of social participation in American society. Putnam observed that while more Americans bowl today than ever before, bowling leagues have collapsed because people are increasingly doing activities alone rather than in groups. This social decline extends across all aspects of American life, from religious groups to parent-teacher associations, resulting in more negative behavior.

Dr. Lee said that healthcare is experiencing a similar crisis of social capital, manifesting in increased violence against healthcare workers and deteriorating workplace relationships. Every manager and clinician should function as a “CFO for social capital,” applying the same discipline to building respect, trust, and teamwork as organizations apply to managing financial capital.

He encouraged healthcare leaders to be disciplined about building social capital by turning their shared values into norms, and then reenforcing those norms.

### COMPLEX VS. COMPLICATED PROBLEMS

A key distinction was made between complicated and complex healthcare challenges:

- **Complicated problems** (like routine surgeries) involve many people performing defined roles, but outcomes are predictable when everyone executes properly.
- **Complex problems** (like individual patient care or overcrowded emergency departments) involve unpredictable interactions between multiple factors requiring adaptive, collaborative responses.



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Traditional management structures designed for complicated problems fail when applied to complex healthcare challenges. What's needed instead are teams with high social capital – groups where trust enables flexibility and shared commitment to patient outcomes.

### BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL: A THREE-STEP FRAMEWORK

Dr. Lee outlined three essential components for systematically building social capital:

- 1. Build Real Connections:** Create genuine networks among healthcare workers
- 2. Strengthen Those Connections:** Make relationships meaningful through respect, organizational pride, and shared purpose
- 3. Transmit the Right Values:** Ensure core values like compassion and teamwork flow through the network with enforcement mechanisms

The Schwartz Center's programs, like the Schwartz Rounds and Stress First Aid, are a great example of how to achieve this in healthcare.

### THE MAYO CLINIC EXAMPLE

Dr. Lee highlighted Mayo Clinic's culture of immediate response to priority clinical pages as an exemplar of effective norm enforcement. The expectation that clinicians answer urgent pages immediately is maintained through strong social consequences, rather than through formal policies. This works because the connections between staff are meaningful enough that no one wants to be seen as unreliable.

### MANAGEMENT AND ENFORCEMENT

Building social capital requires active management, not just good intentions. Dr. Lee advocated for treating respect and courtesy with the same systematic approach as hand hygiene protocols. For example, Parkland Hospital exemplified this by placing "courtesy and respect" stickers on hand sanitizer dispensers, creating regular reminders and reinforcement of behavioral expectations.



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### THE SCHWARTZ CENTER CONNECTION

“The values that the Schwartz Center represents are deeply ingrained in people’s minds. Without these values, you might feel overwhelmed or paralyzed when facing difficult situations,” said Dr. Lee. “But when these values are present, people ask the right question: ‘How are we going to solve this problem?’”

No single person has the expertise to solve a patient’s complex problems alone. It requires a collaborative team that includes clinical staff, social workers, and management personnel. Healthcare is fundamentally a group effort—a social function rather than an individual one.

The Schwartz Rounds program embodies these principles. These monthly forums bring together diverse healthcare teams -- from surgeons to social workers to front desk staff -- to discuss challenging patient cases and topics. The format creates understanding across roles, levels hierarchy, and models psychological safety through shared vulnerability.

To learn more, visit [theschwartzcenter.org](https://theschwartzcenter.org)

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