

Laboratory Leadership in a Time of Change

Strong leadership, forward-looking organizational culture, and readiness for change are necessary to thrive in today's rapidly evolving healthcare system.

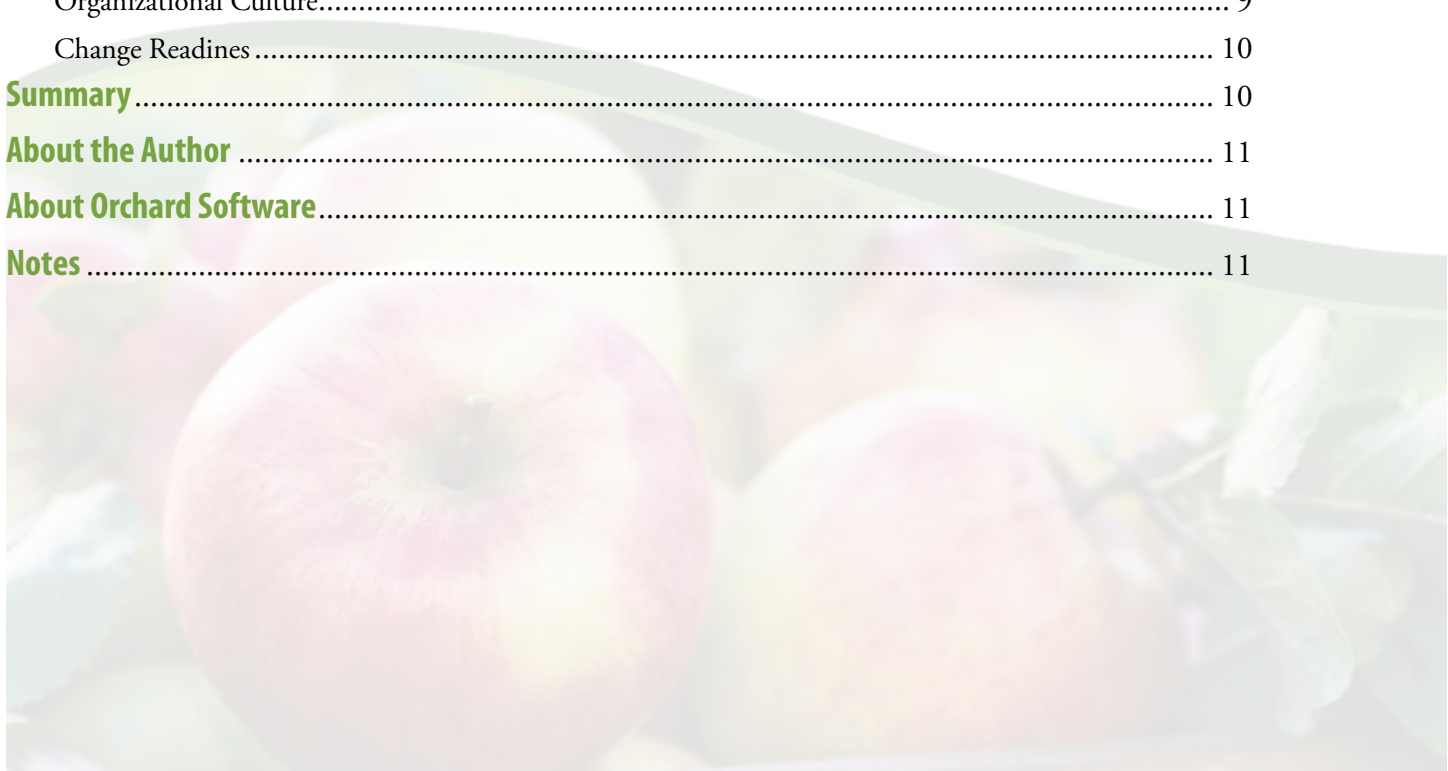
Orchard Software intends to be a collaborative partner to the laboratory community. This paper examines some of the accepted truths about leadership characteristics, shares anecdotal laboratory leadership scenarios, and discusses the importance of change management and maintaining an organization-wide culture of innovation and openness to change.

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Most laboratory managers would agree that no sooner does a procedure get written than it needs to be updated. The joke becomes that we have a procedure of the day; next week it may be completely different. Employees turn over, analyzers change, even the providers change—the only constant is change. However, in retrospect, the pace of change occurring today in laboratories and in healthcare overall makes “the good ol’ days” seem stagnant in comparison. The pace of change back then pales in comparison to today. One fact that stands solid through the test of time is that competent leadership is the cornerstone to workplace effectiveness and employee satisfaction. In this paper, we will share effective leadership strategies and discuss why it is important to develop a culture that is responsive and ready to embrace change.

Leadership is influencing people to follow, while management is making sure processes and procedures are followed.

Leadership vs. Management

Leadership does not correlate with an impressive job title. True leadership comes from the ability to influence others, with respect being earned over time. Often, people consider leading and managing the same, when in reality they are quite distinct. Leadership is influencing

people to follow, while management is making sure processes and procedures are followed. Laboratorians are inherently good at management, but what it takes to be a true leader is not quite the same. True leadership begins with who you are as a person and your depth of character.¹

Middle Management Woes

Middle management, where laboratory supervisors and managers often find themselves, can be quite a challenging balance between upholding the mission of the organization and the day-to-day needs of the staff. And, unfortunately, all too often, middle management comes with little to no training or guidance. Instead, it is learned on the job by trial and error. Managers between the administrative level and the employee level must find a way to maneuver the politics of the organization as a whole, keeping the big picture and business needs as an imperative, yet keeping close at heart the needs of their staff, including ongoing recognition and guidance.

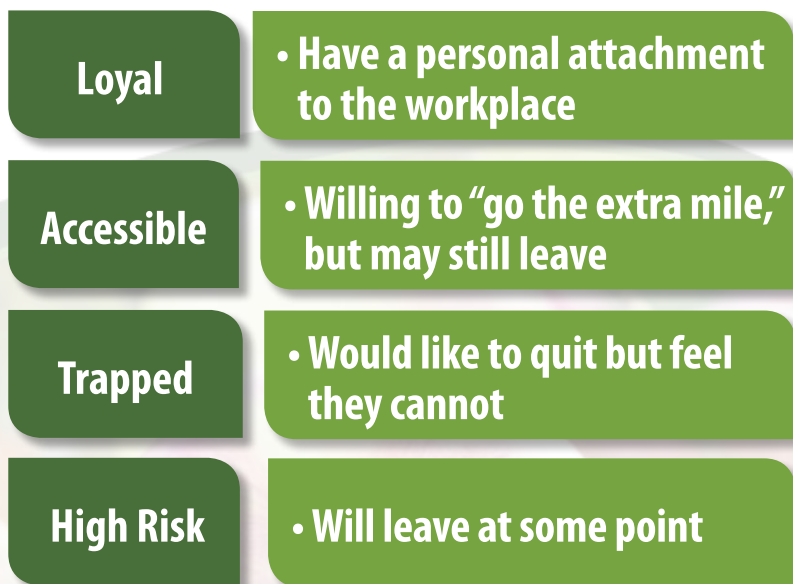


Figure 1: Employee engagement studies classify employees into four groups.

The Power of an Engaged Workforce

People matter and employees like to feel that what they do is important and appreciated. Employees are also motivated by work that they can be proud to be involved in. An engaged workforce is the foundation for productivity. Employee engagement studies performed by the Walker Loyalty Report classify employees into four groups (see

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Figure 1), with true loyal employees being the most valuable and rare.²

Employee engagement has been directly correlated to having a personal connection to your place of employment. According to a 2016

Gallup poll, employee engagement is at only 2% for teams with managers who ignore their employees compared with 61% engagement for employees whose managers focus on their strengths.³ Having an engaged workforce—a team working toward a common goal—creates a more positive work environment to which employees enjoy contributing.

When employees are productive, ethical, and held accountable, longevity increases and the overall quality of work improves. Good leaders learn to find and focus on the strengths of their employees and look at how, as a group, the strengths and weaknesses build to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts. To accomplish this, leaders have to learn to connect with and listen to their staff. Positive personal regard is finding a way to respect our coworkers, even when we may disagree with them at times or on certain topics.⁴ Managers can accomplish this by practicing inclusion and appreciation. Inclusion means having everyone as a participant, helping employees feel they are part of a team that is bigger than them so that they know their contribution is welcome and appreciated. We all like to have our efforts acknowledged and to feel competent. How leaders show encouragement and support can make a big difference in employee engagement; sincere appreciation is highly motivating. Employees also appreciate a boss who is respectful of their time. This respect is exemplified by keeping commitments (e.g., deadlines, focused meetings) and by fair treatment.



Figure 2: Common traits found in strong leaders.

What Does a Leader Look Like?

It turns out that study after study trying to capture the specific traits of a good leader has failed to come up with the exact mix of characteristics. What keeps popping up as a common denominator is that gaining employee respect and motivating employees to work on your team is accomplished by being genuine and authentic. So, while you may have a mentor you can model some of your leadership skills after, the good news is you can still be you. A great leader genuinely develops and displays a passion for their role and what they do. When this is consistently demonstrated, staff learns to trust that their leader is set on doing what is best for the company and for the staff. This foundation serves to create consistency and build trust.

Leaders have to find a balance between leading with their heart and leading with their head that creates an equitable workplace. Relationships must be genuine, but there must also be an understanding of the repercussions when lines of integrity are crossed.

Lab Manager Outtake 1: Looking at the Big Picture

Imagine that your organization is merging with a local hospital. You are told that your laboratory will be downsized and you are asked to prepare a pro forma that outlines the exit of 75% of the lab staff and equipment over the next year.

What would you do?

And, importantly, leaders need a support network made up of people they can turn to for honest, constructive feedback. Many strong leaders develop a support network to lean on when they need advice.

These are just some of the commonalities found in strong leaders (see Figure 2). It is important to note that becoming a great leader does not happen overnight. Leaders cannot lead without a team that wants to follow them, yet it takes time to develop the requisite relationships and trust.

Leadership Skills

Even though there is no formula or one way to be a successful leader, there are some patterns associated with those who have proven to be successful. Some of the skills leaders need to develop include being self-aware, creating a culture of trust, building relationships, strong communication, setting clear expectations for staff, and learning to make wise decisions (see Figure 3).

Establish Self-awareness

To start, it is important for a leader to develop self-awareness. This means learning who you are as a person. What are your strengths and weaknesses? What do you need to improve upon? What pushes your buttons but should not? In order to maintain a high level of motivation, it can be helpful to know what drives you.

Create a Culture of Trust

Creating a healthy work environment where employees feel valued and trust their leader to act appropriately and in their best interests goes a long way toward developing an engaged and productive workforce. When employees

The best leaders have the ability to see the big picture or business plan, rather than getting bogged down by every minor detail. Strong leaders are able to quickly understand what must happen in order for the business to survive, even when this is in conflict with personal emotions (see Lab Manager Outtake 1).

One trait associated with successful leaders is the drive for constant self-improvement and the belief that others should have that same mindset. Another trait often found in great leaders is that they are genuinely not looking for personal recognition; rather, they gladly advocate the strengths of their team and are intrinsically motivated. They also tend to be self-starters—they do not need a plan of action; they can develop one for themselves based on knowing what needs to be accomplished.⁵

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trust that your actions in front of them and your actions when they are not present will consistently follow a path of integrity, they learn to trust you. Set an example by striving to always do the right thing for the right reason, maintaining focus on the end goals.

Leaders empower their team members, seek their input, and listen to what they have to say. They acknowledge good work and give credit when it is earned, making sure the spotlight is on the employee, not the leader. Leaders take the blame when something goes wrong (see Lab Manager Outtake 2). They keep their commitments and deadlines and do not make promises that they cannot keep.

Build Relationships

Building relationships with your employees is key to creating a work environment where they feel acknowledged and appreciated. In a busy healthcare environment, it may be your instinct to rush into your office and get immediately to work. However, think about taking the time to get a feel for the overall vibe in the lab that day. How is everyone feeling? Is there anything you should be aware of that may influence the workday? Remember that you set the tone and employees look to you for their “work mood.” If you come in grumbling and complaining, they will pick up on that and likely follow suit. Be aware of the fact (like it or not) that the attitude or

mood you portray spreads to your staff. A little emotional intelligence can go a long way.

Lab Manager Outtake 2: Shouldering the Blame

One of your techs reported out a CEA of 400 when in actuality the result from the analyzer was >400 and needed a dilution. Because of the erroneous CEA, the oncologist has misinformed the patient that her cancer is responding to the chemo. You explain what happened to the provider and he demands to know who made the error.

What would you do?

Communicate Clearly & Often

In order for staff to feel appreciated and respected, it is important to keep them

in the loop. Frequent and clear communication is important to maintain a culture of trust. When decisions are made that will impact staff, the plan needs to be shared as quickly as possible before the news is spread through the company “grapevine” and possibly misconstrued. We have all played the telephone game, where we sit in a circle and whisper a sentence from one person to the next and are surprised that what was heard by the last person was not the original message.

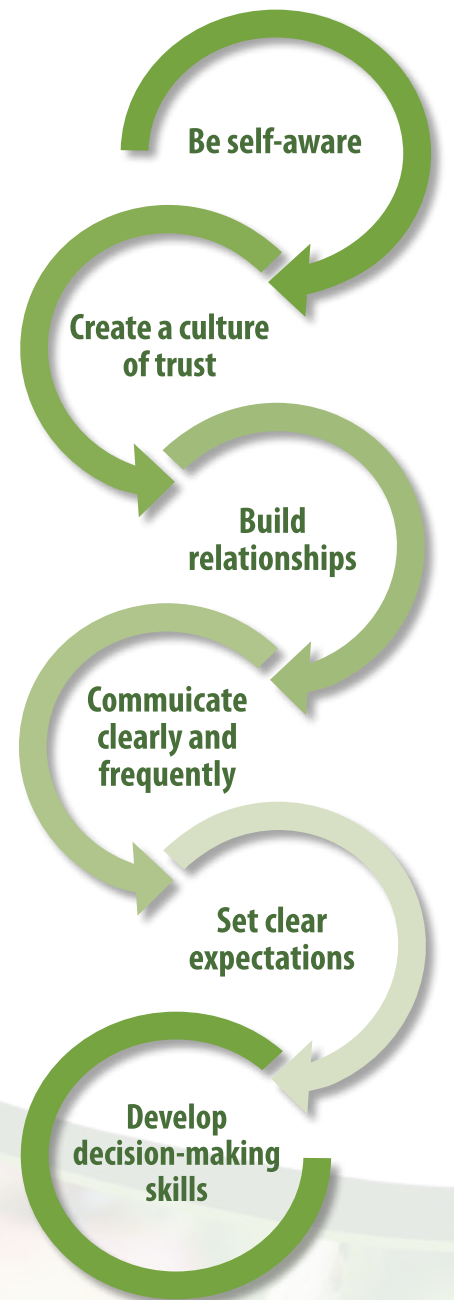


Figure 3: Common traits found in strong leaders.

News needs to come from the manager. Also, when employees understand the reason behind decisions, they get on board. It is much easier to do a task when you understand its value.

Another aspect of clear communication is connecting announcements or changes back to the core mission and vision of your organization. Sometimes in the lab it is easy to forget that the specimens are attached to real people with real health problems. We can get bogged down in rules and forget that our core purpose is patient care.

Set Clear Expectations

Regularly and clearly communicating expectations is appreciated by staff and can help improve employee performance. Having clearly defined, attainable goals helps to keep employees engaged. Just shaving a job description is not enough; employees need regular feedback and clarity of expectations. Find your employees' individual strengths and leverage them to achieve team goals.

Develop Decision-making Skills

Employees are set up for success when managers motivate, help overcome obstacles, develop a culture of trust and accountability, and are reliable to make unbiased decisions that take into account staff needs and the overall business goals. It can be beneficial to think about decisions in regard to their overall impact. For example, how important are the ramifications of a particular decision? For departmental decisions, coach your staff in your culture of doing the right thing, with clear goals in place, and empower them to make decisions on their own. If you have been successful, likely they will make the same decision that you would have made. Bring in other parties for more wide-reaching decisions and carefully weigh pros and cons to be sure you make an informed decision with all the facts taken into consideration.

Leadership Challenges

Is it sometimes easier to follow than to lead? Are there people who are just destined to be leaders and those who are not? These questions can be answered many ways, but the underlying truth is that leadership comes with headaches, and we all make mistakes from time to time. It is important to learn from those mistakes and to continue to grow.

Lab Manager Outtake 3: Stressful Situations

Imagine that your lab has a secondary location where CBCs are performed prior to patients receiving their chemotherapy. There are 20 patients waiting for their results and the power to the entire building goes out. Most of the chemo building and the main lab is connected by generator, but the CBC analyzer in the remote building is not.

What would you do?

Lab Manager Outtake 4: Stressful Situations

You come into the lab to discover that the biohazardous waste box has ruptured and apparently was not packed properly; a bloody biohazardous waste mess has spilled onto the floor AND leaked under the baseboards onto the carpet in two patient exam rooms.

What would you do?

Stress Management

Learning to handle stress helps leaders make calm, equitable decisions. Every job has its stresses, but some stressful situations in the laboratory are quite unique (see Lab Manager Outtake 3 & 4). Stressful situations cannot be avoided, even with the best of planning; there are factors that are not in our control. To balance stress, strong leaders develop practices in their life that help them deal with stress. This can range from exercise and time with family and friends to

spiritual connections or community service—activities that allow you to focus your attention elsewhere and relax your mind and body.

Lab Manager Outtake 5: Turnover

It takes at least four months to fully train a new MT/MLT in the lab. The employee designated as the trainer has trained three new techs back to back. This means for a full year, she has been training constantly. She is exhausted and heading toward burnout.

What would you do?

Reducing Turnover

One of the most costly and frustrating occurrences in the laboratory is employee turnover, particularly because it takes so long to train someone in the lab, even when they are appropriately educated. Every lab has different policies and procedures, so when you lose someone, you lose all that lab-specific knowledge and time spent training.

While training is taking place, productivity is not at its peak because the new employee is learning and the trainer's attention is divided. When someone leaves, they take all the knowledge specific to your organization with them (see Lab Manager Outtake 5). However, highly engaged employees are less likely to leave. It costs less to motivate an employee than it does to hire and train a new one (see Figure 4).

Employees are initially attracted to an organization because of pay and benefits and the desire to find a job that allows a work/life balance (see Figure 5)². After employees are hired, ongoing development and career opportunities take on a greater importance. Of particular interest, employee retention is directly related to a feeling that management genuinely cares about them as an employee and that they feel challenged by their job.

The cost of turnover: % of salary⁶

Lower-paid employees:	30-50%
Mid-level employees:	150%
High-level employees:	> 400%

Figure 4: The cost of employee turnover.

One Bad Apple...

But for all this talk of the importance of employee retention, inevitably there will be employees whom you need to get rid of for the well-being of the entire team. Disruptive employees cannot be ignored, even if their work is exemplary. When employees do not treat one another with respect, there is a decline in energy, focus, creativity, loyalty, and commitment.⁶

Factors That Help Gain & Retain Employees

Pay and benefits

Ongoing learning and development

Overall work environment

Figure 5: Factors that help gain and retain employees.

Whatever the reason, when an employee needs to be fired, managers should not procrastinate. Sometimes, “bad” employees are moved to a different work area rather than being confronted about their disruptive behaviors. This tends to be a mistake; you are simply moving the problem to a new area and the inappropriate behavior continues (see Lab Manager Outtake 6).

The best solution to the “bad apple” problem is to have a stellar interview and hiring process that allows you to avoid these employees from the start. However, interviews are not foolproof and sometimes you end up with unsuitable employees anyway.

Strong leaders have to set clear expectations and a zero-tolerance policy that is well distributed. The leaders set the tone for the overall organizational culture. If it is an acceptance of poor work ethic and disruptive or uncivil behavior, problems will ensue. Walk the walk—teach and model the correct behaviors to help employees learn how to respect and listen to one another. Work to develop conflict resolution skills rather than avoiding a problem and letting it fester. Take complaints seriously and establish a reputation of listening to employee concerns and acting on them appropriately. Establish a culture where employees feel they can safely share what is bothering them, rather than having them feel trapped with no place to turn for resolution. Once a complaint has been made, investigate, determine if it is valid, and act accordingly.

Change Management

Today’s leaders need to be able to flex with the changes and not let them cause undue stress because change is the new “norm.” Leaders who foster an engaged workforce will have a team that is focused and ready to implement change because they believe in its purpose and they know that their best interests and the organization’s best interests are the leadership’s top priority.

Organizational Culture

Employee engagement is greatly influenced by an organization’s culture, and engaged employees are foundational for an organization’s success. One important part of an organization’s culture relates to the overall organizational level of transparency. Lack of transparency leads to frustrated, unproductive employees. Conversely, transparency, fed by communication, builds trust.⁷

Leaders foster a team culture or “connection” by defining vision, value, and voice.⁸ Vision refers to a culture where employees are motivated by the mission, believe the values, and are proud of the organization. Value is created by appreciating each unique employee’s feelings, strengths, and contributions, and helping them grow. Voice refers to

Lab Manager Outtake 6: The Bad Apple

“My teeth are bleeding.”

“I have ants in the kitchen.”

“My keys are locked in my husband’s car.”

Do you ever feel like you have heard every possible excuse for not coming to work and you know you have other employees who would overcome any obstacle to get there? How do you handle it when all these excuses come from the same employee and it begins to affect overall morale? How about the employee that harasses every new hire until you clearly see a pattern to the behavior?

What would you do?

employees feeling empowered, free to share ideas openly, and respectful of one another's ideas. Employees need to be heard and respected. In fact, this type of work environment is associated with healthier employees because their emotional needs are being met, making them happier and more energetic.⁸

Senior leaders have to clearly and repeatedly communicate mission, vision, and values, and share company direction with all employees to create a positive culture. There are four main ways to incite employee engagement and thereby create a positive company culture: communication, growth, trust, and recognition.⁷

Change Readiness

In the big picture of healthcare, organizational readiness for change is a critical component for successful implementation of big changes. In fact, lack of change readiness has been blamed for up to 50% of unsuccessful large-scale organizational change efforts.⁹ There are two well-accepted components to organizational change readiness: change commitment (also called change valence) and change efficacy. Leadership can have a direct influence on both. The most positive form of change commitment is when employees are committed to a particular change because they know it has value rather than because they are forced or obligated to make a change. Change efficacy describes employees' collective belief that they are capable of succeeding at a particular change (similar to a collective self-confidence).

Quality of leadership is directly related to organizational readiness for change. To develop and support organizational readiness for change, leaders can communicate early on about upcoming projects or changes and convey the reasons and benefits associated with the change. Leaders can promote a positive change efficacy by sharing examples of past successes to build employee confidence in collective ability to affect successful changes.⁹ Employees who are motivated to embrace change are often the same ones who end up being change champions that can motivate other employees.

When a leader provides clear and effective support of organizational strategy—proper direction and resources—and the culture is one that embraces change, it is likely that the department will be successful in new endeavors.¹⁰ How does a team establish a culture of change readiness? It emanates from the leadership—not what leaders say but how leaders act. When a team has a tolerance for mistakes, passion for their jobs, and they support one another, innovation is sparked and change is readily accepted. These core values come from the team leader.

Summary

With the current rate of change and disruption in the U.S. healthcare system, it is important that strong leaders are involved in building teams that can affect positive change. While there are traits commonly found in leaders, there is no one effective style. You can find your own style using the key elements of creating a culture of trust, building relationships, and practicing effective communication.

Employees who feel respected, empowered, and appreciated will work tirelessly and support one another. To develop this culture, keep the lines of communication open by scheduling regular meetings and having an open-door policy. Make it clear that each and every one of the staff are important as people and as employees, and that together you make a great team that can handle any challenge that comes your way.

About the Author

Kim Futrell, BS, MT(ASCP), is the Products Marketing Manager at Orchard Software. In her role, she is an advocate for laboratory, lab informatics, and all of Orchard's products. Kim works with product development, marketing, and sales teams to research and publish relevant material to arm employees, customers, and the industry with knowledge through communication and education. Prior to joining Orchard in 2012, Kim's role was Operations Manager of a multi-specialty physician's office in North Carolina. Prior to that, Kim spent more than 20 years managing the laboratory.

About Orchard Software

Orchard Software, headquartered in Carmel, Indiana, and founded in 1993, is a leader in the laboratory information systems industry. Orchard offers a variety of lab system solutions to handle each laboratory's unique testing, workflow, and business situation. In 2013, Orchard celebrated its 20th anniversary, and currently serves more than 1,500 laboratories across the country, helping them to improve efficiency, reduce errors, and enhance integration. For more information on Orchard or feedback regarding this white paper, email news@orchardsoft.com or call (800) 856-1948.

Notes

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A “Must Read” for Laboratorians & Healthcare Leaders

As part of our ongoing efforts to support the laboratory community, Orchard Software offers an informative white paper series chock-full of the latest lab-related information you need to stay successful. If you are interested in learning about the laboratory’s role in the changing healthcare environment, download Orchard’s informative white papers at www.orchardsoft.com/whitepapers.



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