The Hierarchy of Intervention

Moving from asking people to try harder toward redesigning the conditions in which the work happens.

Higher interventions rely less on memory and individual choice. **MORE RELIABLE ↑**

SYSTEMS-ORIENTED INTERVENTIONS — Change the conditions around people

6 Forcing functions & constraints

Remove the risky option or make the desired action unavoidable.

EXAMPLE A required approval step cannot be skipped.

5 Automation & computerization

Use technology to perform, route, prompt, or block critical steps.

EXAMPLE Complaints route automatically to the right reviewer.

4 Simplification & standardization

Reduce complexity and variation; establish a clear default.

EXAMPLE Every team uses the same hiring rubric.

PEOPLE-ORIENTED INTERVENTIONS — Support what people know and do

3 Reminders, checklists & double checks

Support attention and add a deliberate verification point.

EXAMPLE A second reviewer checks disciplinary decisions.

2 Rules & policies

State expectations, boundaries, responsibility, and consequences.

EXAMPLE A conduct policy defines response and accountability.

1 Education & training

Build knowledge, awareness, judgment, and skill.

EXAMPLE Leaders practice feedback and difficult conversations.

Using the hierarchy well

DIAGNOSE

Is this a skill gap, an unclear expectation, a fragile process, or a system that makes failure likely?

COMBINE LEVELS

Training and reminders may support a new process. Durable change often uses reinforcing levels.

LOOK HIGHER

When a problem repeats across people or over time, examine the conditions around it.

Adapted from ISMP Canada, Hierarchy of Effectiveness (2013).
Leadership adaptation: Ben & Jamesa. | View original framework