

The Operating Model 2026

7 patterns separating behavioral health's strongest operators

01 THE GROWTH MODEL SHIFTED.

Behavioral health is moving to a new growth model. The operators pulling ahead share documented unit economics, diversified portfolios, and deep management benches under the CEO.



- **DO THIS NOW:** Document your unit economics. If they can't be produced on demand, that's the first project.

02 DIVERSITY IS DURABILITY.

A diversified portfolio across services, payers, geographies, and care settings gives operators both durability under pressure and room to grow into new markets.



- **DO THIS NOW:** Map your portfolio across payer mix, state mix, and service mix. Where you're underweighted is where the next growth move lives.

03 AI KEEPS YOUR CLINICIANS.

The clinician shortage isn't going away. The operators with the best retention are deploying AI to give clinicians their evenings back.



- **DO THIS NOW:** Frame AI to clinical staff as time back, not productivity owed. Deploy inside the EMR, not as a separate system.

04 THE FRONT DOOR IS FINANCE.

Up to 85% of revenue cycle errors trace back to admissions, and the strongest operators are running their front door as a financial workflow that catches denials before they happen.



- **DO THIS NOW:** Separate the financial conversation from the admissions conversation. Admissions builds rapport; a dedicated financial engagement team protects margin.

05 CASH IS A CEO METRIC.

Most CEOs can't produce their cost per admission on demand; the ones who can are running revenue cycle as a leadership discipline rather than a CFO line item.



- **DO THIS NOW:** Ask for cost per admission and cost per reimbursement at your next leadership meeting. If they can't be produced, that's the first project.

06 CULTURE IS THE CONSTRAINT.

What slows scaling most is culture, not capital; operators who move a culture leader into a new site for the first 6 to 12 months save themselves literal years of ramp time.



- **DO THIS NOW:** Before signing a new site, name the culture leader who'll live there. If you can't name one, hold the site.

07 COMPLIANCE IS A MOAT.

Run as a daily operating rhythm, compliance protects revenue, retains staff, and earns payer trust.



- **DO THIS NOW:** Move compliance from a department to a cadence: daily, monthly, quarterly, biannual. Establish AI governance before regulators force it.