



'Friday Night at the ER' teaches teamwork



The teamwork-building board game Friday Night in the ER — developed by Breakthrough Learning's mother-and-son team of Bette Gardner and Jeff Heil — is used by more than 1,000 organizations, including the Mayo Clinic and Walt Disney Co.

CATHY CHENEY



By **Elizabeth Hayes** — Staff Reporter, Portland Business Journal

Nov 6, 2017, 12:01pm

It's Friday night in a hospital Emergency Room. Suddenly, a staff member goes home sick. Later, a nearby hospital is diverting ambulances, then a patient requires a special procedure and additional staff are needed to assist.

This scenario is all too real to ER doctors and nurses. It's also the heart of a board game produced by Portland-based Breakthrough Learning and used by 1,000 organizations worldwide, from the Mayo Clinic to the Walt Disney Co. to the U.S. Navy. Friday Night at the ER has been translated into French, Spanish, Turkish and Chinese.

While the game uses a busy ER as the focal point, the setting promotes teamwork and big-picture thinking in a way that can benefit any industry, not just health care.

"It teaches people how to work effectively across boundaries," said Jeff Heil, Breakthrough Learning's COO. "People learn through the experience of the game and rise above their silos to achieve team goals."

The brain behind the game is Bette Gardner, a health care consultant from the San Francisco Bay Area-turned accidental inventor who also happens to be Heil's mom. She created it initially for the San Jose Medical Center, which was experiencing a high rate of ambulance diversions. Through word of mouth, other hospitals started expressing an interest and she realized "we have a product on our hands."

She created the prototype on butcher paper, with garbanzo beans and macaroni for patients. Heil, who used the game as a spill mat as a kid, graduated from the University of Oregon in 2012 with a degree in product design and stepped in to help his mom give the product a makeover and manage the business.

The game takes about an hour to play. Groups of up to 200 people are divided into four-person teams, who must make decisions during each simulated hour. Patients might start arriving in high numbers, causing demand for beds to ripple throughout the hospital.

“Unless the team is in sync with its decision making, performance will suffer,” Gardner said. “Everyone has a responsibility for patient flow. Lots of internal dynamics happen in the course of game play. There are teams that innovate and teams that don’t.”

If there’s a backlog, quality indicators go south and costs rise. Teams may decide to overcome staff shortages by sharing across departments. A guided debrief follows game play, teams can discuss what worked and what didn’t.

“The Emergency Department alone cannot solve ED overcrowding,” Gardner said. “Everyone has a role.”

Some hospitals, after using the game, have developed a pool of cross-trained staff, Heil said. One hospital instituted a 3 a.m. huddle, another started a program to pull ER pro-actively to the critical care unit.

While the game works on a literal level for hospital workers, Breakthrough Learning’s customer base includes organizations as diverse as Sony Pictures Entertainment, The Boeing Company, dozens of universities and FEMA. Some organizations use it for senior leadership, some for new-employee orientations, others for team-building at retreats.

“It’s a testament to the universality of the lessons that anyone can step into the experience and gain something from it,” Gardner said.

The company: Breakthrough Learning

What makes it innovative: The company teaches teamwork in various organizations through a board game set in an ER.

Headquarters: Portland

Top executive: Bette Gardner, CEO; Jeff Heil, COO (mother-son)

Learn more: blearning.com



Link to view/share online: <http://bizj.us/1pe1li>