

Building Successful  
**Research Collaboratives**  
for Healthcare Improvement

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## 5.3 The Importance of Having a Shared Mental Model

### Mental Model Research Team

“When the possibility of participating in the STAR-2 study was explained to the bedside RNs, they were excited about the opportunities to share troubles as part of a larger project that might result in changes to the way we do our work. When it came time to consent participants I was overwhelmed with the response. I thought we might have difficulty signing up 20 RNs from one of our units but we ended up with 24 who consented to participate over a two day period.”

### What is a Shared Mental Model?

Simply defined, a mental model is the organized knowledge that people use to interpret, explain, analyze, and predict what is happening around them (Mathieu et al., 2000). When the members of a team organize their knowledge of team tasks, equipment, roles, goals, and skills in a similar way, they share team mental models (Lim & Klein, 2006). Shared mental models help collaborative researchers to coordinate with teammates, form accurate expectations about tasks, and understand and anticipate each other’s actions and needs (Espinosa et al., 2002; Lim & Klein, 2006).

### How do Shared Mental Models Benefit Teams?

Teams make fewer mistakes than individuals, especially when each team member knows his or her responsibilities, as well as the responsibilities of other team members (King, Battles, Baker, Alonso, Salas, Webster, et al., 2008). Organizational researchers have observed that: when team members have a shared mental model, it increases the overall performance of the team (Mathieu, Heffner, Goodwin, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 2000). This is particularly true in urgent, high stakes, or novel situations that permit only brief communication and strategizing among team members (Lim & Klein, 2006).