

Healthy workplace culture in health systems: A proposed National Framework



ABOUT COSA

The Clinical Oncology Society of Australia (COSA) is the national oncology community bringing together multidisciplinary health professionals across all cancers to advance care and improve outcomes.

Our vision is: Quality multidisciplinary cancer care for all.

Our mission is: To improve cancer care and control through collaboration.

COSA achieves this by:

- **supporting the professional and educational needs of cancer health professionals**
- enhancing cancer care and control through network development
- **advocating for improvements in cancer care and control**
- facilitating research across the spectrum of cancer

COSA initiatives led by its members rely on broader health systems and system culture for their adoption, implementation, and sustainability. Healthy workplace culture forms the foundation for workforce wellbeing across health systems. Recognition of the importance of workforce wellbeing is growing rapidly and has led to its greater prioritisation at local and government level. The cancer care workforce experiences high rates of burnout and continue to face a high risk of burnout, resulting in diminished workplace wellbeing. Workplace wellbeing is a key driver of healthcare quality, safety, and sustainability. Therefore, the wellbeing of our colleagues within their respective workplaces is significant, and importantly will have flow on effects that will ensure ***“Quality multidisciplinary cancer care for all”***.

In the absence of a consistent national and international framework for healthy workplace culture, COSA has initiated this transformative endeavour to influence policy change at political and senior leadership levels. While many of our collaborating organisations are primarily linked to oncology, it is essential to emphasise that the principles of a healthy workplace culture have universal applicability and great cancer care relies on whole of system culture due its integrated nature.

A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR HEALTHY WORKPLACE CULTURE IN HEALTH SYSTEMS

Rationale for a new framework

A thriving workplace culture serves as the cornerstone for optimal workplace performance, employee engagement, experience, overall wellbeing, and, importantly within health systems, improved patient experiences and outcomes¹⁻⁹. Occurrence of burnout, bullying and harassment, workforce shortages, attraction and retention, mental illnesses, racism and suicide among health workforce and difficulty implementing health equity programs have attracted media and political attention on workplace culture in recent times; especially post COVID 19.^{10,11} Recent evidence underscores that the root causes of burnout and its adverse effects stem from healthcare system structures including resource allocation rather than relying solely on individual behaviours and resilience^{12,13}. Additionally, contemporary workplaces have been blessed with workforces from diverse age groups, ethnic backgrounds, and intellectual and leadership capabilities that could be leveraged for productivity and collective growth. Consequently, numerous organisations are making significant investment in developing and implementing initiatives aimed at enhancing their organisational culture that is fit for modern workplaces and systems.

Presently, an abundance of guidelines and frameworks for cultivating healthy workplace cultures exist, each rooted in varying definitions and content; thus, making it difficult to achieve consistency in culture¹⁻⁹. These guides predominantly emphasize individual behaviours, actions, and performance, within the confines of hierarchical and autocratic systems often neglecting collective, systemic, and structural aspects. Despite these disparities and incongruities, they do share numerous and overlapping common concepts that need to be categorised, simplified and made tangible for action.

Therefore, the primary aim is to develop a contemporary framework for "healthy workplace culture" that achieves alignment of values and purpose across all layers of the system. This values and purpose-aligned organisational culture fostered by collective leadership has the potential to effect positive flow-on benefits for the wellbeing of our communities and position Australia at the forefront of the global labour market for healthcare, outpacing international competitors.

Methodology for developing the framework

This framework was developed by a working group within COSA supported by experts in this field as co-authors and partnering organisations and further refined through COSA Council and member feedback. Consumer aspects were incorporated into the framework based on the contributions of consumers participating in the Queensland Clinical Senate research related meeting in June 2023 and Australian Teletrial Program stakeholder engagement forums.

Commonly used culture frameworks, systematic reviews and guidelines used by Government and non-Government organisations were examined to identify common concepts. They include alignment with values and purpose, fostering collaboration, consensus decision making, promoting leadership attributes, team orientation, encouraging collective decision-

making, driving innovation, enabling processes, policies, and resources for infrastructure and workforce, championing diversity and inclusion, emphasizing continuous improvement, nurturing learning systems, and prioritising the wellbeing of both the workforce and consumers¹⁻¹².

PARIHS implementation science framework and lessons learnt designing, piloting, and advocating for health equity programs were used to develop themes of action for the framework^{14,15}. This framework posits that successful implementation hinges on the interplay of innovation, context, and facilitation. Themes of actions guided by this framework will therefore be feasible for implementation. This will enable all levels and layers of national and state and territory health systems to address all elements of the workplace culture and achieve holistic reforms.

Proposed national framework for healthy workplace culture in health systems

Drawing from common concepts identified in workplace culture frameworks, guidelines, and systematic reviews, lessons from implementing health equity programs, incorporating systemic components and team principles, and guided by implementation science frameworks, four actions were developed: 1. Team based functioning, 2. Co-design methodology for problem solving, 3. Enabling and values aligned behaviours and system components and 4. Monitoring and enabling mechanisms.

Adoption of formal team-based functioning yields many benefits that are inherent aspects of wellbeing such as workforce empowerment, engagement, and sense of belonging¹⁶⁻²⁰. In addition, collective leadership accommodates all leadership styles, fosters strength-based approach to leadership and aligns with the concept that “everyone is an incomplete leader and in need of a complete team”¹⁷. Team-based functioning across organisations ensures that purpose alignment, consensus decision making, values alignment, and diversity and inclusion of gender, ethnic backgrounds, age groups, technological and subject matter expertise, and other priority groups are formally addressed, and compliance monitored.

Using these themes, a new framework for healthy workplace culture has been formulated by presenting a description and model for a healthy workplace culture.

We define a healthy workplace culture as:

A way of functioning in which members from all layers and streams of the workforce; guided by organisational values and in partnership with consumers, enable and care for each other to achieve the organisational purpose, and in doing so, place wellbeing of the workforce and consumers at the centre.

This “values and purpose aligned culture” is characterised by:

- ***Diverse and inclusive professional, consumer and multidisciplinary teams that are committed to the purpose of the organisation and adopt consensus for decision making.***
- ***Application of co-design principles for problem solving***
- ***Enabling and values aligned interprofessional interactions, operational behaviours, policies, programs, procedures, and resource allocation***
- ***Monitoring, and enabling of the above three components.***

System lasagne model of healthy workplace culture

Utilising the PARIHS Implementation Science framework¹⁴, we can encapsulate the aspects of culture listed before within a tangible visualisation – the System Lasagne Model (Figure 1). Reference to food is commonly used in health settings such as Swiss cheese model and its application to patient safety²¹. This analogy to Lasagne enforces that access to food is a basic human right, and so too is access to a healthy workplace culture given its implication for wellbeing.

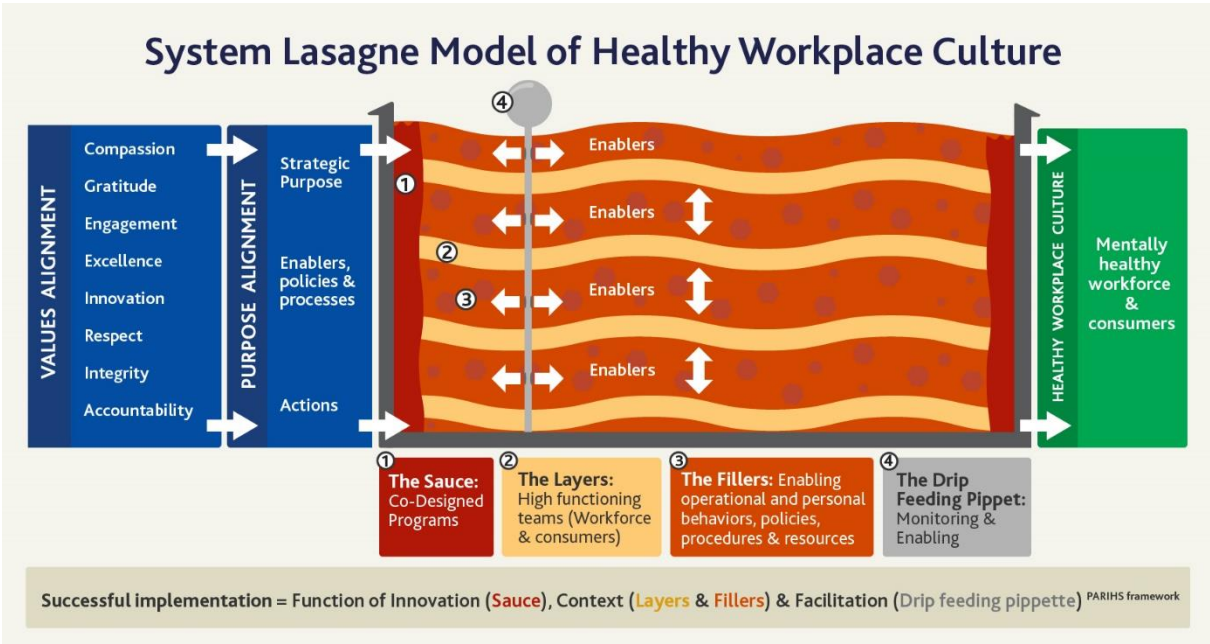


Figure 1: System Lasagne model of healthy workplace culture

Explanation of healthy workplace culture through an analogy to lasagne

In the box below, an explanation of healthy workplace culture through an analogy to Lasagne is provided for the purpose of making healthy workplace culture a tangible phenomenon.

To elucidate the concept of aligning purpose and values within organisations and work units, an analogy is drawn with a lasagne. In this analogy:

Sauce represents programs crafted to transform purpose into actionable initiatives. Just as sauce infuses flavour throughout a lasagne, these programs imbue the organisation with purpose.

Layers and Fillers symbolize the contextual factors within the organisation. These include the workforce, interpersonal dynamics, operational behaviours, policies, procedures, processes, and available resources. Similar to the layers and fillings in a lasagne providing structure and substance, these contextual elements support the implementation of programs.

Drip Feeding Pipette embodies the role of facilitation through monitoring and enabling mechanisms. Like a skilled chef adding just the right amount of sauce to each layer of lasagne, facilitation ensures that the implementation process proceeds smoothly.

Flat Layers (**Culture of Teams or Action 1: Team based functioning**) absorb the sauce, facilitating the embedding of programs. Just as the pasta layers in a lasagne soak up the sauce to be cooked together, a culture of teams ensures collective engagement in implementing new initiatives.

Tasty Sauce (**Culture of Co-design or Action 2: Co-design methodology for problem solving**) is prepared by the right people working in partnership. Just as a flavourful lasagne sauce is crafted by expert chefs, a culture of co-design ensures that programs are developed collaboratively, resulting in a more palatable outcome.

Fillers play a vital role in enabling all layers to absorb the sauce. Just as various ingredients in a lasagne harmoniously come together to enhance the dish's overall taste, **enabling interprofessional and operational behaviours, processes, policies, and resource allocation** to combine to support the implementation process (Action 3: Enabling and values aligned behaviours and system components).

Drip Feeding Pipetting Function (**Action 4: Monitoring and Enabling Functions**) ensure that all layers and fillers are cooked at the same time. Just as a drip-feeding pipette evenly distributes sauce to all layers, facilitation functions maintain a synchronised approach to implementation.

Principles of implementation of the framework

To translate the description of healthy workplace culture outlined in this document (and the System Lasagne model) into the reality of creating values and purpose aligned workplaces and systems, the following four themes of actions are recommended:

1. Implementation of Frameworks for Team-Based Functioning across all layers of the system
2. Implementation of Frameworks for "Co-Design" Methodology for problem solving
3. Ensure current personal and operational behaviours, Policies, Programs, Processes, and Resource Allocation are Values Aligned and Enabling
4. Set up Mechanisms for monitoring and enabling of themes above.

These recommendations, and practice points for implementation, are further elucidated in [Appendix A](#).

Application of the framework in systems and workplaces

Teams, working groups and committees at all layers could organise their operations using a structured framework for teams that aligns with the organisation's purpose and values. Co-designed initiatives can be cascaded through layers, enabled by values-aligned operational and personal behaviours, policies, procedures, and resource allocation. Both internal and external evaluations and monitoring play pivotal roles in maintaining the quality of culture. Regular assessments at the unit and organisational level help identify areas for improvement, ensuring that the culture remains vibrant and aligned with its intended goals. Managing operational performance continues to occur within the existing pathways and structures of the organisation.

This model, rooted in the principles of implementation science, not only serves to illustrate cultural elements but also offers a structured approach for integrating and embedding programs into the broader organisational system.

Conclusion

This proposed National Framework for healthy workplace culture aims to foster alignment of values and purpose across all layers of the system. As described, to translate the description of healthy workplace culture including the System Lasagne Model, four actions have been recommended. These include: 1. Implementation of frameworks for team-based functioning across all layers of the system; 2. Implementation of frameworks of co-design for problem solving; 3. Ensure current personal and operational behaviours, policies, programs, processes, and resource allocation are values aligned and enabling; and 4. Set up mechanisms for monitoring and enabling these themes. It is thought that by implementing this National Framework, it will facilitate a healthy workplace culture which in turn will see workplaces best placed for optimal workplace performance, employee engagement, experience, overall wellbeing, and improved patient outcomes.

PRINCIPLES FOR IMPLEMENTING THE FRAMEWORK

A detailed implementation plan is outside the scope of this document, with only the principles discussed here. Organisational purpose is typically outlined in strategic plans, with the expectation that all layers and professional streams of the workforce will utilize these plans to translate the organisation's mission into actionable steps². Culture guides encompass a plethora of values, including trust, transparency, compassion, respect, accountability, ethics, innovation, engagement, and collaboration, amongst others. Regardless of the specific values chosen, genuine alignment is achieved when interpersonal interactions, operational protocols, and policies are firmly rooted in these values, rather than merely focusing on individual behaviours.

For example, many organisations may endorse initiatives like the "R U OK" campaign to foster compassion and respect among their workforce. Simultaneously, they may continue to uphold operational practices, such as cumbersome recruitment procedures and delays, delayed email responses, inadequate workforce-to-workload ratios, and the failure to fully implement initiatives designed to address disparities and improve conditions for vulnerable population groups, inclusive of rural and First Nations people. These discrepancies, often labelled as "lip service," represent instances of misalignment with organisational values, which can detrimentally affect the wellbeing of individuals, leading to frustration and work-related distress^{10,11}.

To translate the description of healthy workplace culture and the System Lasagne model into the reality of creating purpose and values aligned workplaces and systems, the following four themes of actions are recommended:

1. Frameworks for Team-Based Functioning

This is to foster and develop diverse and inclusive multidisciplinary and professional teams at each layer aligned with organisational values and engaged towards the strategic purpose. These frameworks or checklists include items such as purpose, membership, roles and responsibilities, consensus decision-making, values-aligned inter-professional interactions, operational behaviours, policies, processes, and resource allocation, capacity building as well as mechanisms for monitoring and enabling of overall team performance.

Practice points:

- Teams usually use the organisational strategic plans to guide their activities and these activities are reflected in team agenda and performance metrics. Given the number of activities, they are divided among the team members as part of their portfolio.
- At an organisational level, it is useful to explore how professional and multidisciplinary teams can be established to achieve the organisational purpose. This activity may help rationalise and strengthen the committees, working groups and teams that already exist.
- In choosing membership and roles and responsibilities, attention is given to ensuring diversity and inclusion of members based on gender, ethnic backgrounds, age groups, expertise in subject matter, and technological aspects, and priority and vulnerable

populations. The nature and role of consumer participation is incorporated at all layers. At management layers, it is important to explore how frontline workforce is represented.

- In relation to decision making within teams, it is important to use consensus and democratic principles for most decisions especially if they impact on broader team members, systems, and stakeholders.
- Internal and external mechanisms are important for monitoring and quality improvement of team performance. As an example of internal mechanism, Junior members of the workforce and students at placements could be assigned the task of assessing team performance and team morale with other flow on benefits such as succession planning, learning of leadership on the job and empowering and engaging junior workforce. Many options are available for external monitoring that need to be carefully selected for transparency and independence. Team performance needs to be included in performance appraisals rather than relying solely on individual performance, supported by formal evidence of compliance with the framework. Adoption of consensus decision making within teams can be evidenced by documenting examples.
- Contents covered in action 3 apply to teams when they consider values alignment.

2. Frameworks for "Co-Design" Methodology

There are a plethora of toolkits and workshops on how to apply co-design methodology within current systems. To ensure that the co-design methodology is adopted to its full potential, it is useful to pose some key questions. These could include the “Why” for the topic of discussion, “who” the participants and collaborators were in the co-design, “how” they were selected, and how multiple perspectives were considered, accepted by stakeholders, and incorporated in real time.

Practice points:

- It should be standard practice to make sure stakeholders know exactly what has been included in the design and contribute, in real time, in person or virtually.
- Participants need to have expertise, a proven track record, and hold varying perspectives in the topic rather than selected purely based on their roles.
- An Innovation checklist¹⁷ is a useful tool to ensure the final solution/program is worthwhile and implementable.

3. Ensure Current personal and operational behaviours, Policies, Programs, Processes, and Resource Allocation are Values Aligned and Enabling

Regardless of the values chosen by organisations, true values alignment occurs when values are applied to operational behaviours, policies, procedures, and resource allocations rather than solely to individual behaviours. For example, integrity can be demonstrated by implementing items in strategic action plans. Compassion can be shown by filling vacancies in a timely manner, allocating resources for workforce through formal workforce planning

processes inclusive of all professional and operational streams and reducing red tape. Respect can be demonstrated by responding to emails and closing communication loops in a timely manner and attending meetings and clinics on time. Innovation and excellence can be encouraged by being curious about ideas instead of saying NO. Respect, excellence, gratitude, and innovation can be addressed by offering programs to recognize contributions.

Practice points:

- As part of implementing a team framework, each team has an opportunity to decide what key actions they can adopt to align with core organisational values.

4. Set up Mechanisms for Monitoring, and Enabling of culture framework

As listed in action 1 practice points, it is essential to establish local and system-wide mechanisms (internal and external) to monitor adherence to team frameworks, co-design principles, and to ensure operational and personal behaviours, policies, processes and resource allocation are reviewed and improved regularly, fostering an enabling system.

Modern policies relating to psychosocial safety and hazards could be utilised as effective levers for quality improvement purposes.

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