



Clinical  
Oncology  
Society of  
Australia

# HEALTHY WORKPLACE CULTURE IN HEALTH SYSTEMS

A NATIONAL  
FRAMEWORK



APPROVED BY COSA COUNCIL 22 MARCH 2024

# Executive Summary

## Purpose

The primary purpose is to develop a contemporary framework for "healthy workplace culture" that fosters 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 workforce, consumers, and communities.

## Development of a contemporary 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, outcomes, and health equity. Additionally, poor workplace culture has been linked to mental health and social issues in communities.

Presently, an abundance of guidelines and frameworks exist for cultivating healthy workplace cultures, each rooted in varying definitions and content. These guides predominantly emphasise individual behaviours and actions within the confines of hierarchical and autocratic systems, often neglecting collective, systemic, contemporary, and structural aspects.

Several national peak bodies, universities, advocacy organisations, and a State Department of Health, partnered in this initiative and are listed at the end of this document. Drawing on common concepts identified in workplace culture frameworks, guidelines, systematic reviews, lessons from implementing health equity programs, incorporating systemic components and team principles, and guided by implementation science frameworks, four principles were developed to implement the framework.

Using these themes, a new framework for healthy workplace culture has been formulated presenting a **definition** grounded in “a way of functioning where humans help others to help others” and a **System Lasagne Model for a healthy workplace culture** to make culture tangible.

## Principles of implementation of the framework

To translate the framework into the reality of creating values and purpose-aligned workplaces and systems, the following actions are recommended:

- Implement team-based functioning using contemporary frameworks and checklists
- Adopt “co-design” methodology for problem solving
- Ensure current personal, interprofessional and operational interactions, actions, processes, policies and resource allocation are values aligned and enabling
- Set up local and system level mechanisms for monitoring and quality improvement.

To achieve broader cultural reform, organisations could leverage this framework to provide a fresh approach to developing cultural initiatives, education providers could incorporate the framework into wellbeing and professionalism curricula, and accreditation bodies could include culture in accreditation standards.

## 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 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 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 to 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 outcomes<sup>1-9</sup>. 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<sup>10,11</sup>. Recent evidence underscores that the root causes of burnout and its adverse effects stem from healthcare system structures including resource allocation rather than solely individual behaviours and resilience<sup>12,13</sup>. 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 investments in developing and implementing initiatives aimed at enhancing their organisational culture, so they are fit for modern workplaces and systems.

Presently, an abundance of guidelines and frameworks exist for cultivating healthy workplace cultures, each rooted in varying definitions and content; thus, making it difficult to achieve consistency in culture<sup>1-9</sup>. These guides predominantly emphasise 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 to 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 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, emphasising continuous improvement, nurturing learning systems, and prioritising the wellbeing of both the workforce and consumers<sup>1-12</sup>.

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<sup>14,15</sup>. 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 workplace culture and achieve holistic reforms.

## 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 belonging<sup>16-20</sup>. In addition, collective leadership accommodates all leadership styles, fosters a strength-based approach to leadership, and aligns with the concept that “everyone is an incomplete leader and in need of a complete team<sup>17</sup>”. 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 presenting a description and model for a healthy workplace culture.

We define a healthy workplace culture as:

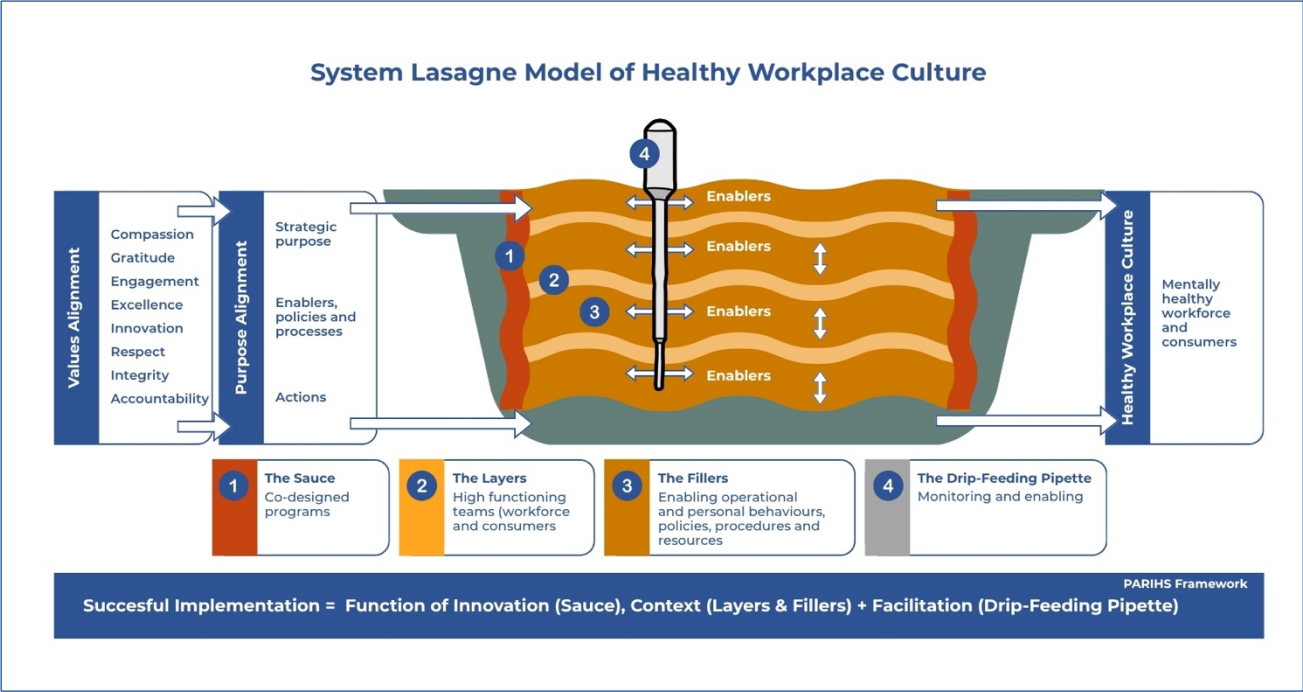
*A way of functioning in which members from all layers and streams of the workforce; guided by organisational values and in partnership with consumers, enable and care for each other to achieve the organisational purpose, and in doing so, place wellbeing of the workforce and consumers at the centre.*

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 actions, policies, programs, procedures, and resource allocation
- Monitoring, and quality improvement mechanisms.

## System Lasagne Model of Healthy Workplace Culture

Utilising the PARIHS Implementation Science framework<sup>14</sup>, 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 safety<sup>21</sup>. 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** symbolise 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**).

The **Drip-Feeding Pipette** function (**Action 4: Monitoring and Enabling Functions**) ensures 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 for action are recommended:

1. Implement team-based functioning using contemporary frameworks and checklists
2. Adopt "co-design" methodology for problem solving
3. Ensure current personal, interprofessional and operational interactions, actions, processes, policies and resource allocation are values aligned and enabling
4. Set up local and system level mechanisms for monitoring and quality improvement.

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 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 utilise these plans to translate the organisation's mission into actionable steps<sup>2</sup>. 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 workforces. 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<sup>10,11</sup>.

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 for action are recommended:

### 1. Implement team-based functioning using contemporary frameworks and checklists

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 teams, 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. Adopt "co-design" methodology for problem solving

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 being selected purely based on their roles.
- An innovation checklist<sup>17</sup> is a useful tool to ensure the final solution/program is worthwhile and implementable.

## 3. Ensure current personal, interprofessional and operational interactions, actions, processes, policies, 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 recognise 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 local and system level mechanisms for monitoring and quality improvement

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 and 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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