Healthy workplace culture in health systems: A proposed National Framework

Clinical Oncology Society of Australia

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

THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR HEALTHY WORKPLACE CULTURE IN HEALTH SYSTEMS

A thriving workplace culture serves as the cornerstone for optimal workplace performance, employee experience, overall well-being, and, importantly within health systems, improved patient outcomes[1-8]. Recent evidence underscores that the root causes of burnout and its adverse effects stem from healthcare system structures rather than relying solely on individual resilience[9,10]. Consequently, numerous organisations are making significant investment in developing and implementing initiatives aimed at enhancing their organisational culture.

Workplace wellbeing impacts 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 framework for healthy workplace culture, COSA has initiated this transformative endeavour. 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.

Presently, an abundance of guidelines for cultivating healthy workplace cultures exist, each rooted in varying definitions and content. These guides predominantly emphasize individual behaviours and performance, often neglecting collective and structural aspects. Moreover, they do not consistently incorporate systemic components into the cultural framework. Despite these disparities and incongruities, they do share common themes, such as

alignment with values and purpose, fostering collaboration, promoting leadership attributes, team orientation, encouraging collective decision-making, championing diversity and inclusion, emphasizing continuous improvement, nurturing learning systems, and prioritising the well-being of both the workforce and consumers.

Therefore, our primary purpose is to develop a contemporary framework for "healthy workplace culture" that fosters alignment of purpose and values 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 well-being of our communities and position Australian workplaces at the forefront of the global labour market, outpacing international competitors.

Drawing from common themes identified in workplace culture guidelines, incorporating systemic components and team principles, and guided by implementation science frameworks, this document presents a new framework for healthy workplace culture by presenting a description and model for a healthy workplace culture.

We propose a healthy workplace culture is characterised 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.***
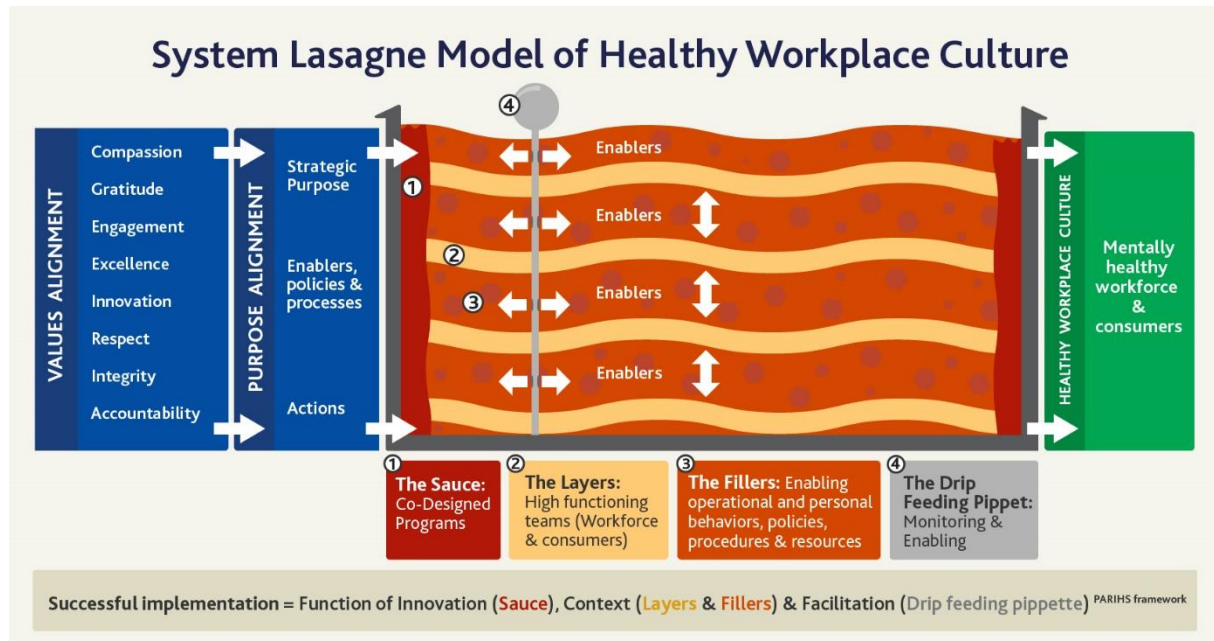
A "values and purpose aligned culture" is characterised by:
- Diverse and inclusive professional and multidisciplinary teams that are committed to the purpose of the organisation and adopt consensus for decision making.
- Application of co-design principles for problem solving
- Enabling and values aligned 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 framework[11], which posits that successful implementation hinges on the interplay of innovation, context, and facilitation and the lessons learnt from designing and implementing health equity programs[12], we can encapsulate the aspects of culture listed before within a tangible visualisation – the System Lasagne Model (Figure 1). This model, rooted in the principles of implementation science, not only serves to illustrate these concepts but also offers a structured approach for integrating programs into the broader organisational system.

Figure 1

System Lasagne Model of Healthy Workplace Culture

Successful implementation = Function of Innovation (Sauce), Context (Layers & Fillers) & Facilitation (Drip feeding pippette) PARIHS framework

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 innovations or programs crafted to transform purpose into actionable initiatives. Just as sauce infuses flavour throughout a lasagne, these innovations 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 and innovations.

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)** absorb the sauce, facilitating the spread of innovation. 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)** 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 innovations 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** combine to support the implementation process.

Drip Feeding Pipetting Function **(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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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 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 at Appendix A.

APPLICATION TO ORGANISATIONS AND WORK UNITS

Teams, working groups and committees at all layers should organise their operations using a structured framework that aligns with the organisation's purpose and values. Co-designed initiatives can be cascaded through layers, enabled by values-aligned operational behaviours, policies, procedures, and resource allocation. Both internal and external evaluations play a pivotal role in maintaining the quality and effectiveness of the culture framework. 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 should occur within the existing pathways and structures of the organisation.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

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 steps[1]. 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 behaviour.

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 well-being of individuals, leading to frustration and work-related distress[9-10].

HIGH FUNCTIONING TEAMS AS THE FOUNDATION FOR COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Rather than exclusively focusing on individual development programs aimed at building expertise in each of these elements, workforce empowerment, engagement, sense of belonging, and fostering diversity and inclusion, can be better addressed through the formal structuring of teams[13-17]. The implementation of team frameworks 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.

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 actions are recommended:

1. **Implementation of 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, 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 organisational level, it is useful 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 populations. Nature and role of consumer participation is incorporated at all layers. At management layers, it is important to explore how frontline workforce is represented.
- Contents covered in action 3 apply to teams when they consider values alignment.
- Internal and external mechanisms are important for monitoring and quality improvement of teams' performance. As an example of internal mechanism, Junior members of the workforce and students at placements could be assigned the task of assessing teams' performance and team morale with other flow on benefits on 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. Teams' 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.

2. **Implementation of Frameworks for "Co-Design" Methodology:**

There are a plethora of toolkits and workshops on how to apply co-design methodology exist within current systems. To ensure that the co-design methodology was adopted to its full potential, it is useful to list some questions. These could include the "Why" for the topic of discussion, "who" the 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.

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 on strategic action plans, while compassion can be shown by filling vacancies in a timely manner 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. 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 policies and processes are reviewed and improved regularly, fostering an enabling system.

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