

CELEBRATING THE BEST IN CORPORATE CULTURE

MARY TERESA BITTI
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Waterstone Human Capital's Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Awards program. While today a growing body of research — including from this program — has led to widespread understanding that strong corporate cultures drive higher levels of performance, this critical link was only just emerging back in 2003.

Through Waterstone's executive search business, president and CEO Marty Parker saw up close what the innovators and early adopters were achieving. He knew it was important to celebrate organizations that were investing in their organizational cultures and winning as a result. He hasn't looked back — and neither has corporate Canada.

"Today, Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures is an ecosystem as our growing alumni network continue to support and help each other," says Parker. "Corporate culture has become an area of best practice."

This year's honorees are not just culture experts — they continue to raise the bar for what's possible when people and culture fuel overall organizational strategy.

ENGAGED, ACCESSIBLE LEADERSHIP

"We've known for a long time that leadership drives culture and culture impacts performance, but how organizations do it has really progressed," says Parker. "COVID accelerated a shift that was already well under way: the move to engaged and accessible leadership. What this really means is leadership now is focused on setting the tone and building capacity through and with others in a very focused way that creates behavioural replication that drives outcomes. This is so much more than walking the talk. It means they are adapting their own styles to their teams and their teams are doing the same, they are connecting in multiple ways, in person and virtually, they are listening as much as they're talking and acting on what they're learning."

Serial entrepreneur Victor Tam and his co-founders launched their award-winning luggage brand Monos, a Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Mid-Market category winner, in 2019. COVID was less than a year out, effectively putting travel on pause. That didn't seem to hinder Monos's growth trajectory. Four years later, Monos has nearly 200 employees across the globe, revenues are north of \$100 million and the brand is well on its way to expanding from e-commerce to multiple bricks-and-mortar locations.

"Our differentiator is our people," says Tam. "We need a team that is passionate and believes in the vision and wants to be here. When you have that it's a magical spot. People are having fun, they are performing. It doesn't feel like work."



Clockwise from top left: PurposeMed team members at annual all-team retreat in Banff, Alta.; Monos team at annual retreat in Mexico; NorQuest College team members at their annual College Cultural Day gathering; AstraZeneca team members volunteer their time to plant trees in Mississauga, Ont. IMAGES SUPPLIED BY WATERSTONE HUMAN CAPITAL

To create this winning environment, from day one the co-founders included all hires in all strategic meetings. "We did not have founders' meetings. They were part of the conversations of why we're doing this, what's working, what's not working," says Tam. "We believe that transparency and contextualizing gives people the autonomy, trust and confidence to make their own decisions."

As the company scaled, the three founders encouraged their leaders to do the same with their teams. Strategic meetings are company-wide — there are no management-level meetings. Each quarter, the founders share the good, the bad, and what's upcoming. Everyone has access to how the company is doing financially. Twice a year, Monos holds town halls to celebrate the team, achievements and personal milestones.

"This empowers the team to do their best work and see a future for themselves growing with us. There are no secrets. Without transparency, that's where toxic culture starts," says Tam. "For us, culture is how we as leaders show up every day and that includes being involved and engaged with all that's happening, whether they're big meetings, small meetings, or casual conversations. People see us as people; that authenticity shapes how we are as founders. I'm very relaxed, I treat and interact with the team in a way I would with my friends and family, and that shapes the overall environment."

PEOPLE FIRST AND ACCOUNTABLE

This year's honorees are supporting the needs and success of employees while driving organizational accountability, says Parker. "They are hitting the right balance after learning the lessons of COVID. Organizations did an incredible job of caring for their teams, paying attention to mental health. That isn't going away, but organizations exist to drive outcomes and that requires organizational accountability."

Dan Turner, president and CEO of Xperigo, a Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Growth category winner and three-time honoree, says he has two jobs as CEO: to make decisions with people first in mind and, second, make sure the company stays healthy. "I say to my team, sometimes decisions are going to appear to impact them negatively but ultimately the most people-focused approach I can take is to keep this company healthy, because without that, then jobs are at risk and we won't be able to deliver on our purpose. That weighs heavily on me as CEO."

Xperigo provides a scalable platform of mobility and customer service solutions for the world's top automakers' customers. Its purpose is to: "elevate the human experience by connecting drivers to people that can help." Specifically, this involves connecting drivers to roadside assistance, emergency services and information to enhance their customer experience.

"The more you invest in people, the more they trust you have their back and the more they'll deliver for you," says Turner.

That trust is earned each day through open, ongoing communication across multiple channels. It starts on day one. Each new hire gets to meet with Turner, who shares the history and culture of the business and plans for the future. At quarterly town halls, the executive team shares what's going on in the business, the sales pipeline, and financial results. Turner hosts regular 15-minute CEO videos and coffee chats with Dan sessions, where he meets with individuals at every level in the organization about what's going on in their lives and jobs. Xperigo has a mentorship program where leaders all serve as mentors to a large group of mentees. When the pandemic hit, the entire company shifted to remote work.

"People knew we were doing everything we could to protect them, and they did everything they could to keep the company strong during one of the most difficult times

for the automotive sector I've ever experienced. Nobody was buying cars the first two years of the pandemic."

In 2023, Xperigo almost doubled market share and saw an increase of 400 per cent-plus in the number of vehicles registered on its platform. "The real boost to performance through the pandemic was in our team's ability to execute and get things done," says Turner.

INCLUSION CHAMPIONS

"Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures winners are intentional about advancing diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) across their processes and organizations," says Parker. "These initiatives are good for business. We are seeing more corporate scorecards including DEIB. If you do not get the importance of being inclusionary, there will be no room for you in the future — you are not going to get diverse thinking, innovation, high-quality people."

NorQuest College, a Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Non-profit and Broader Public Sector category winner, has made DEIB part of its new strategic plan: NorQuest 2030: We Are Who We Include. "Inclusiveness is in everything we do," says president and CEO Carolyn Campbell.

She joined the college about three and half years ago because of its purpose-driven culture. "Our purpose is about transforming lives, which transforms communities, transforms societies and transforms the future. When you are here, you can see how that's happening on a person by person basis," she says.

To craft NorQuest 2030, she led a comprehensive listening tour involving students, staff, academic teams, communities, government, industry, as well other post-secondary institutions. "They told us we had an incredible framework, let's be bold and lean into our culture, our purpose and values of inclusion and belonging."

At NorQuest that's about

being barrier-free, welcoming and accessible for all students, at all levels, for industry partners and for faculty and staff. As an employer specifically, the college's inclusiveness is a differentiator in attracting staff.

"We track these efforts to understand what our commitment means to employees," Campbell says. "Since 2012, we've seen employee engagement rates grow by more than double, and we now sit four points above the average engagement rate for post-secondary institutions in North America. There's still work to be done, but it's so rewarding seeing these kinds of quantifiable transformations."

Leaning into "we are who we include", Campbell and her team created an equity office, which has multiple platforms around anti-racism, equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and decolonization.

The college made its purpose, values and commitment to EDI apparent in its HR systems and changed the hiring process to be more inclusive and less stressful. This includes a brand refresh focused on accessibility, providing interview questions in advance, removing names from résumés when screening to minimize bias, diverse hiring panels, and asking potential hires about EDI and about their values to ensure alignment with NorQuest's values.

The college also leverages data and external third-party perspectives like the global diversity, equity and inclusion benchmarks. Its EDI talent management committee also gathers feedback from its people to further evolve and develop EDI action plans.

"About 1,000 people attended our recent Culture Day," says Campbell. "The event provides a state of the union and gives NorQuesters an opportunity to hear from colleagues about the great work they're doing. This is the first time we made it into the Top 50 research institutions in the country, at number 25. We have many new programs, and great progress on anti-racism and decolonization of curriculums."

Continued, see Culture, FP10

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CULTURE HELPS GENERATE NEXT-GEN LEADERS

CONTINUED from FP9

“Moving these large, strategic initiatives would not be possible without our people feeling invested in our purpose. People feel like they are a part of something bigger.”

FOCUSED ON DEVELOPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

Organizations continue to prioritize employee development and retention. They are focused on succession planning, and are taking a proactive approach to developing diverse pipelines for a variety of roles. “This has been happening for a while, but the sophistication is growing,” says Parker. “Our team-building leadership work at Waterstone has tripled because organizations want access to best practices in this area. They are identifying the skills they have and those they’ll need to drive their strategic plans, and they’re developing the next level of leadership from within their organizations.”

More than this, learning and development programs are being shaped through the lens of inclusivity as well as the key behaviours that drive performance in their organizations. This is exactly the case at biopharmaceutical company AstraZeneca Canada, a 2023 Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Culture Enterprise category winner.

Gaby Bourbara is a result of the purpose-driven company’s approach to developing its next generation of leaders. Bourbara joined the company as an MBA co-op student from McMaster University 22 years ago and went on to hold senior commercial roles in a number of therapeutic areas. He led

the U.S. respiratory business and served in Canadian and global leadership roles in oncology before his appointment as general manager of Alexion, the company’s rare disease business. On March 1, 2024, he became president of AstraZeneca Canada.

“AstraZeneca has an incredibly diverse and inclusive culture that supports life-long learning, growth and development,” says Bourbara. “I am here because of the strong leaders who mentored me, the learnings I gained from exposure to markets within and outside of Canada, and opportunities to grow and build capabilities in different functions and roles along the way.”

AstraZeneca Canada’s approach is rooted in the belief that the company is at its best when employees are at theirs. Exposing employees to ongoing learning and skills development, along with encouraging them to explore stretch projects and new roles, is key to sustaining a high-performance culture.

“We have a powerful purpose to push the boundaries of science to deliver life-changing medicines,” says Bourbara. “The magic happens when diverse perspectives are valued and heard, and when people are supported in getting the breadth and depth that helps them grow into strong contributors and excellent leaders. I have experienced this throughout my career, and it’s what I try to model. It’s the collective power of diverse teams that drives innovation, solves challenges, and enables great performance,” says Bourbara.

The result: AstraZeneca recently announced a major expansion of its R&D hub, the creation of a new Alexion rare disease hub in Canada, and hired 500 highly skilled people in the last year. “This



Dan Turner, Xperigo president and CEO, at the 2024 Canadian International Auto Show in Toronto with three Xperigo client development team members. IMAGE SUPPLIED BY WATERSTONE HUMAN CAPITAL

global investment in AstraZeneca Canada is a recognition of our positive, collaborative and inclusive culture and our track record,” says Bourbara.

PURPOSE-DRIVEN

PurposeMed, a virtual care company connecting patients dealing with complex health challenges with specialist clinicians, launched its first brand, Freddie, during the early days of the pandemic. Since then, the Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Cultures Emerging category winner has set itself apart as a high-performing organization improving access to empathetic, complex care to some of Canada’s most vulnerable communities: LGBTQ2S+ individuals, neurodivergent persons, and people

who are gender-diverse.

“We’re committed to solving some of health care’s most complex challenges that no one else is willing to tackle. To do that, we team up with passionate, high achievers who aren’t afraid to do things differently and who are aligned to our key values of being patient-first in all we do, working with urgency as a team, and taking ownership of achieving results,” says co-founder and CEO, Dr. Husein Moloo.

PurposeMed’s mission and the nature of the services it provides has meant a deep commitment to advancing DEIB from day one. “There’s no way we’d be able to develop the right services for the communities we’re building for without having such a diverse team to represent and

share the lived experiences of our patients.”

Based on self-reported data, 68 per cent of PurposeMed’s team members identify as women, five per cent as non-binary, gender fluid, or multiple genders, and two per cent identify as transgender. Twenty-five per cent are part of the LGBTQ2S+ community, 21 per cent are living with a disability, and 33 per cent are of racialized identity.

PurposeMed has incorporated sexual health education into the onboarding process, launched a DEIB council, developed patient advisory boards, provided more than \$130,000 to date in grants and sponsorships to LGBTQ2S+ groups, and increased mental health benefits and gender-affirming care

to better support team members.

PurposeMed’s keen alignment to their mission is making Canada’s health care system more inclusive and accessible — and changing lives for the better. Their team is achieving patient satisfaction averages greater than 97 per cent across its brands.

It is helping to prevent over 125 HIV cases per year through Freddie, Canada’s largest and highest-rated sexual health service for the LGBTQ2S+ community. Data from more than 10,000 patients treated by PurposeMed’s Frida, which provides diagnosis and treatment for adult ADHD, shows 80 per cent reported clinically significant improvements in feelings of hopefulness and self-worth within six weeks and patients see a 34 per cent improvement in their ADHD symptoms by month four. An astounding 99 per cent of Frida patients say they’ve experienced a positive life impact from their treatment.

“Not only does our work have such a positive impact on our patients, but our focus on preventative care saves the Canadian health care system hundreds of millions of dollars by reducing HIV transmissions (through Freddie alone). The success we’ve experienced through growing Freddie has allowed us to expand our brand lineup and help thousands of patients through Frida, and provide crucial care to our gender-affirming care patients with Foria,” says Dr. Moloo. “We’ve just launched Freddie in the U.S. and are excited about what’s to come. As we move forward, our commitment to our mission remains unchanged: we’ll keep opening doors to compassionate care for those who have previously felt left out in the cold.”

CANADA’S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURE AWARDS HONOUREES FOR 2023

CANADA’S MOST ADMIRABLE CEOS

Enterprise Curtis Stange, president and CEO, ATB Financial (Edmonton)

Mid-Market Ratana Stephens, co-founder and CEO (Retired), Nature’s Path Foods (Richmond, B.C.)

Growth Chief Terry Paul, CEO, Membertou Development Corporation (Membertou, N.S.)

Emerging Rebecca Kacaba, CEO and co-founder, DealMaker (Toronto)

Non-Profit and Broader Public Sector Jennifer Gillivan, president and

CEO, IWK Foundation (Halifax)

MacKay CEO Forums Social Purpose Innovator Rob Miller, CEO and co-founder, Miller Titerle Law Corporation (Vancouver)

CANADA’S MOST ADMIRABLE CPCOS

Enterprise Norm Sabathy, executive vice president, people, communications and technology, Cadillac Fairview Corporation (Toronto)

Mid-Market Cheryl Kerrigan, chief people officer, BlueCat (Toronto)

Growth Christine Vigna,

chief people officer, Dejero Labs Inc. (Waterloo, Ont.)

Emerging Stephanie Silver, vice president, people and culture, North Strategic, Notch Video and MSL Group (Toronto)

Non-Profit and Broader Public Sector Shaun Simms, chief, people, communications and strategy officer, Ottawa Community Housing (Ottawa)

CANADA’S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURES - ENTERPRISE

AstraZeneca Canada (Mississauga, Ont.)

Bruce Power (Tiverton, Ont.)

Celestica (Toronto)

CWB Financial Group (Edmonton)

High Liner Foods (Lunenburg, N.S.)

Loblaw Companies Limited (Brampton, Ont.)

Maple Leaf Foods (Mississauga, Ont.)

Purolator (Mississauga, Ont.)

SAP Canada (Toronto)

STEMCELL Technologies (Vancouver)

CANADA’S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURES - MID-MARKET

Behaviour Interactive (Montreal)

D2L Corporation (Kitchener, Ont.)

East Side Games (Vancouver)

First West Credit Union (Langley, B.C.)

G Adventures (Toronto)

Interac Corp (Toronto)

Massilly North America Inc. (Brantford, Ont.)

Monos (Vancouver)

Odlum Brown Limited (Vancouver)

Rümi Powered by ATCO (Calgary)

CANADA’S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURES - GROWTH

Big Blue Bubble Inc. (London, Ont.)

Centra Windows (Langley, B.C.)

Det’on Cho Group of Companies (Yellowknife)

East Coast Credit Union (Dartmouth, N.S.)

Hazelview Investments (Toronto)

HomeStars (Toronto)

Igloo Software (Kitchener, Ont.)

Inline Group Inc. (Edmonton)

Loopio (Toronto)

Xperigo (Markham, Ont.)

CANADA’S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURES - EMERGING

Gestisoft Inc. (Montreal)

Henderson Partners LLP (Oakville, Ont.)

Iversoft Solutions Inc. (Orleans, Ont.)

Kognitive Tech Inc. (Toronto)

Kudos (Calgary)

Numinus Wellness (Vancouver)

Pagefreezer (Vancouver)

PurposeMed (Calgary)

SureCall (Calgary)

The Poirier Group (Toronto)

CANADA’S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURES - NON-PROFIT AND BROADER PUBLIC SECTOR

BCAA (Burnaby, B.C.)

Canuck Place Children’s Hospice (Vancouver)

Creative Options Regina (Regina)

Egg Farmers of Canada (Ottawa)

Kids Help Phone (Toronto)

NorQuest College (Edmonton)

Ottawa Community Housing (Ottawa)

Scarborough Health Network (Scarborough, Ont.)

Standards Council of Canada (Ottawa)

Vancouver Airport Authority (Richmond, B.C.)

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“WHAT SETS CURTIS APART IS HIS UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO BUILDING AN EXCEPTIONAL WORKPLACE CULTURE. CURTIS’S EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP HAS NOT ONLY PROPELLED ATB FINANCIAL TO NEW HEIGHTS BUT HAS ALSO LEFT A LASTING IMPACT ON THE FINANCIAL INDUSTRY AND THE COMMUNITIES IT SERVES.
— WAYNE CHIU, FOUNDER, THE TRICO GROUP OF COMPANIES

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TENDING TO THE CULTURAL HEARTBEAT

CURTIS STANGE, ATB FINANCIAL TOP CEO HONOREE

DENISE DEVEAU
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

There is a common saying amongst leaders that culture eats strategy for breakfast. That concept is alive and well for Curtis Stange, president and CEO of ATB Financial, and a top CEO for 2023 in the Canada's Most Admired Corporate Culture Awards program.

“Alignment between the two is critical, because culture is the heartbeat of the company,” he says. “It’s reflected in everything we do as we drive to perform.”

Established in 1938, ATB Financial has grown from one branch in Rocky Mountain House to become the largest Alberta-based financial institution, with assets of \$60.2 billion. Today, ATB Financial’s more than 5,000 team members serve over 800,000 clients through 280-plus locations with personal, business, agriculture, corporate, investment banking, and wealth management services.

For Stange, culture and people have always been the foundation of the financial services industry. “The industry has changed meaningfully over the years. What has never changed is that it’s a people business, both internally and externally. This is especially relevant today when we find ourselves operating in a world that is volatile, uncertain, and complex.”

He says he is fortunate to have been able to work with leaders who instilled that thinking early in his career. “I have learned over the decades about the importance of agility and predictability. You need both. In a world that is so fast-paced, and where team members are being asked to deliver high-quality projects in short periods of time, they must also have an environment of stability and know exactly what is expected of them. Leaders who set clear direction and recognize the importance of going slow to go fast are likely to have higher-performing teams.”

There has also been a significant shift in “quotients” that define leadership, he adds. “During hiring in the 1980s, organizations focused on a leader’s intelligence quotient. In the 1990s and early 2000s, that shifted to the emotional quotient, recognizing the importance of transparency and authenticity of leaders connecting with



Clockwise, from top: ATB Financial CEO Curtis Stange speaking at President’s League ceremony; with ATB inclusion council; with ATB Financial team members. *ATB FINANCIAL IMAGES*

teams and developing relationships. That has continued to this day.”

Now it is the adaptability quotient that drives successful leadership today, he says. “AQ connects to the nimble organizations need to have and the cultures they have had to develop over the years.”

Stange has applied those lessons during his time with ATB Financial — even more so since assuming the role of president and CEO in 2018. Not only has the Alberta crown corporation achieved the best financial results in its history under his leadership, it has also garnered a multitude of best workplace awards in the province and the country — accomplishments that he gives full credit to his leadership team for.

One of Stange’s first projects as CEO was forming a strategic leadership team to develop a 10-year plan (known as ATB’s Path to 2030), ignited by the organization’s Purpose: We exist to make it possible.

In 2021, the leadership team, together with team members, created the ATB ID, which is comprised of four unique traits (or values) and a series of supporting behaviours that team members are encouraged to live by every day: One ATB, Client Obsessed, Driven to Perform, and Champions of Belonging. In 2022, ATB also launched a new brand promise publicly called Powering Possibility.

Along with those initiatives, the leadership team expanded team member support and training, as well as diversified services and advanced technology innovation. In fact, Stange was recognized globally as one of the Top Financial Technology CEOs of 2022 for championing the way technology enhances and automates the delivery of financial services, among numerous other accolades.

Diversity of thought is also an integral part of ATB Financial’s success, he adds. “Our strength comes from the unique abilities and per-

spectives we each bring to the table. I have begun to understand and leverage that over the years and work with the team to foster an inclusive workplace where all team members can thrive.”

As part of that, he has championed the organization’s team member networks. The networks form an inclusion council which hosts events, increases awareness, and provides learning opportunities and support to team members across a variety of marginalized communities.

ATB has also invested in robust leadership and development programs, including more recently in its *Pivotal Leader DNA* program, a robust six-month executive leadership experience designed to help leaders master the skills they need to lead ATB on its path to 2030.

Investment has also been focused on mental health leadership training. “It has really accelerated leaders’ confidence to lean in and talk to team members about

what’s on their minds,” says Stange.

Leadership is not the only initiative under Stange’s watch. He makes a point of being front and centre for all team members. When he first became CEO, for example, he conducted a cross-province listening tour to ensure he listened to what his team needed, notes Joan Hertz, the board chair, ATB Financial. “This speaks to his commitment to caring about what the team thinks, before forming his strategy and plans for the company. ATB has always had a reputation for a very strong culture of caring and connection to Alberta; however, this did not always connect to results. Since Curtis took over as CEO, we have seen our culture of caring and connection flourish, while also adding the element of performance and accountability for results. This has all been driven by his leadership.”

Stange and the leadership team also conduct ATB Culture Day events for new hires,

where they personally discuss ATB’s purpose, culture and strategy. In addition, he hosts a weekly all-company livestream called Fridays in 30, where he shares his thoughts, news and encouragement, as well as opens the floor to any questions from team members.

Other programs the leadership team has supported include Everyday Heroes, an online reward and recognition platform allowing peers to recognize each other for their work. From those recognitions, on an annual basis, a select group of team members are chosen to join the President’s League as the company celebrates the best-of-the-best for personally bringing ATB’s strategy to life and living the ATB ID.

Stange has also been a passionate advocate for mental health, serving on multiple boards and advisory committees, and incorporating mental health support initiatives into the company.

One particular point of pride for Stange is ATB’s external recognition as a great place to work. “We have ranked in the top lists eight years in a row in multiple performance areas. Those awards are pretty proud moments for all of us.”

ATB Financial is living the purpose and making it possible, he adds. “We balance our success over four stakeholder groups: team members, clients, community, and our shareholder. We’re not only one of the best places to work in Canada, but our clients also look favourably on us because we deliver a ton of value to them and their communities. That’s a priority and a focus of our cultural agenda.”

“What sets Curtis apart is his unwavering commitment to building an exceptional workplace culture,” says Wayne Chiu, founder, The Trico Group of Companies. “Curtis’s exceptional leadership has not only propelled ATB Financial to new heights but has also left a lasting impact on the financial industry and the communities it serves.”

Stange has always maintained that purposeful and profitable companies are more ambitious, attract the best talent, inspire richer innovation, make quicker decisions, are more trusted, and enjoy greater client loyalty. “If you lead a company in terms of the why (our purpose), the what (our strategy), the how (our values), and the who (our brand as an organization and powering possibilities for our clients), we are able to deliver value in unique and personal ways and achieve meaningful results.”

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“OUR FOUNDERS WERE COMMUNITY LEADERS. WE AREN'T JUST AN EMPLOYER IN THE COMMUNITIES WHERE WE ARE, WE ARE CITIZENS OF THESE COMMUNITIES, EVERY SINGLE ONE OF US. AS CITIZENS, WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO MAKE IT THE BEST POSSIBLE PLACE IT CAN BE FOR EVERYONE.”
 — DEBRA DOUCETTE, PRESIDENT AND CEO, ODLUM BROWN

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A CULTURE BUILT TO ENDURE

ODLUM BROWN

MARY TERESA BITTI
 POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

In 2023, full-service investment management firm Odlum Brown celebrated its 100th anniversary — a milestone that president and CEO Debra Doucette credits to the firm's clear sense of its values and purpose, and its culture. These attributes have guided the firm through all of the world's changes since Odlum Brown first opened its doors, and they continue to pave the way for the future.

Doucette does not have to look far to see how different things were in 1923. The firm still has some of the handwritten transaction ledgers from those early days: blue ink for buys; red ink for sells. In her credenza, Doucette has a little book of about 3x5 inches. Inside are formulas for calculating bond yields.

While technologies and processes have changed, the firm has remained dedicated to its founders' people-first focus. “We are in the financial services industry but, really, we're in the relationship business,” says Doucette. “Our purpose is to help our clients achieve their financial goals. We do this by making sure we understand what they want to achieve and that they understand how we can help them.”

This type of high-touch service is increasingly rare in an era of robo-advisors and one-size-fits-all products. “We are not a product-focused firm. We build solutions for individual clients based on the relationships we build with them,” says Doucette. “That's at the core of how we do what we do.”

Odlum Brown, which has six locations, more than 370 team members and over \$18 billion in assets under management, has consistently been recognized for its high-performance, people-centric culture. This marks the third consecutive time Odlum Brown has been named one of Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures. The firm has also been recognized as one of Canada's Best Managed Companies for each of the past 24 years.

In its most recent internal engagement survey, Odlum Brown achieved a 90 per cent response rate and an eNPS of 94 per cent of team members stating they would recommend the firm as a good place to work.



Odlum Brown team members celebrate the firm's 100th anniversary and come together to support the communities where they live and work.

ODLUM BROWN IMAGES

“We are very proud of the recognition because it shows that if you keep trying to do the right thing, if you are very intentional about staying true to your core values, purpose and culture, you will continue to connect with clients who align with the vision of the firm,” says Doucette.

“Our culture is about openness, collaboration and respect. Everybody works hard to model that behaviour. We are also a 100 per cent employee-owned firm, with broad ownership, and that helps reinforce the idea that this is our business and that we all have a role to play in its success,” says Doucette. “Team members who join us from other firms consistently say it feels different at Odlum Brown.”

A key aspect of this difference is the priority the firm places on creating a positive and meaningful work experience, one that is not easily replicated and that makes team members feel they are part of something bigger. This sense of belonging is reflected in the firm's long-standing commitment to giving back. “Our founders were community leaders,” says Doucette. “We aren't just an employer in

the communities where we are, we are citizens of these communities, every single one of us. As citizens, we have a responsibility to make it the best possible place it can be for everyone.”

The firm supports more than 150 community organizations across Canada via a robust program of sponsorship and corporate giving. It also provides team members with ample opportunities to volunteer in support of these organizations. In 2020, Odlum Brown earned a Canada's Volunteer Award from the Government of Canada in recognition of its team members' outstanding community engagement.

To mark its 100th anniversary, Odlum Brown invited team members to help the firm make an even bigger difference by nominating community organizations close to their hearts. Ten organizations received \$1,000 each in honour of the celebration.

“I grew up benefitting from community outreach,” says Doucette. “I know it matters, and I'm fortunate to lead a firm that believes the same. It is one of the ties that binds us.”

In many ways, the firm's purpose and focus on rela-

tionships has created a virtuous circle of impact that has helped clients, team members and the community alike.

“There will always be a place for commoditization in the financial services business, but we want to focus on the relationship, on really understanding what our clients need and delivering solutions that are designed specifically for them,” says Doucette. “To make that happen, we need to build a culture internally that aligns us to our purpose.”

Odlum Brown is deliberate about achieving that alignment by nurturing a culture of accountable and intentional leadership. Over the past 10 years, the firm has grown its People and Culture team and focused on developing its next generation of leaders by investing significantly in leadership and development.

More specifically, the firm has worked to ensure all team members are empowered to be a leader in everything they do — at work, at home and in their communities. “We have created initiatives to help all of our team members adopt a leadership mindset,” says Doucette. “We want to help them achieve

what they want to achieve in their own lives and, at the same time, bring that leadership expertise to the benefit of our firm.”

The firm's learning and development program includes “Odlum Brown University” education sessions; skills-based training; workshops on interpersonal and communication skills; wellness presentations; as well as its signature program, Dr. Vince Molinaro's The Leadership Contract, which the firm introduced nine years ago. Over 100 team members have completed the program to date.

“For us, leadership is inclusive. Our message is that everyone here has an opportunity to be a leader and we're going to help you to develop those skills. It's not about a title. It's really about a leadership mindset as opposed to a leadership responsibility,” says Doucette. “Leadership is about how you show up no matter what your role is.”

Last year, the firm also introduced a professional mentorship program with a commitment to put mentoring at the heart of Odlum Brown's career development programs. Its pilot phase was oversubscribed, with

35 mentor-mentee matches, and plans are in place for expansion going forward. “Our message that everyone can be a leader is resonating,” says Doucette.

It is also confirming Odlum Brown's long-held — and proven — belief that focusing on people and relationships is a key differentiator. This year marked the firm's 30th anniversary of its Annual Address presentation series for clients. Each year, Doucette meets clients across the firm's locations who are eager to share stories about how Odlum Brown helped their parents and how the firm's current cohort of investment advisors are helping them.

“That tells me that the idea of building a relationship that is deep and genuine is enduring,” says Doucette. “The world will look different, we're going to communicate differently, but relationships matter.”

When asked what she's most excited about for the future, Doucette does not hesitate: “We have so many smart, engaged leaders in our firm. I'm excited to see how they envision the next 100 years, knowing they're ready to take us to the next level.”

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CANADA'S MOST ADMIRABLE CEOs: DRIVING SOCIETAL IMPACT AND PERFORMANCE

MARY TERESA BITTI
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

* responses have been edited for length.

In its 10th year, Waterstone Human Capital's Canada's Most Admired CEO Awards program has taken on new meaning well beyond what Marty Parker, president and CEO of Waterstone Human Capital, ever imagined. When he launched the program, the goal was to turn the spotlight on the leaders driving Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures — Canada's premier celebration of organizational culture.

At this point, the link between great cultures and high performance is deep and well understood. Today's Most Admired CEOs are being celebrated because of their character, their alignment to organizational culture, and their keen personal sense of purpose.

"This year's winners are people who are driven by something bigger than themselves — they're driven to grow and succeed and achieve, but it's about more than just outcomes. It's about purpose."

It's an evolution that led Waterstone (in collaboration with their partner, MacKay CEO Forums) to launch a new category this year, the MacKay CEO Forums Social Purpose Innovator Award, and to look to the future with even more optimism.

"These leaders have businesses to run, and everything that comes with that, but they also understand and believe in social good," says Parker. "I believe we are going to see far more of this — and wouldn't that be great."

ENTERPRISE CATEGORY WINNER: CURTIS STANGE, PRESIDENT AND CEO, ATB FINANCIAL

What role does purpose play for you as a leader?

We exist to make it possible. This is our guiding light; the filter through which we make decisions. We distinguish between having a purpose and being a purpose-driven company. The latter is where we focus on four key stakeholder groups: team members, clients, shareholders and the broader communities we serve. We are a company that has a purpose that inspires us and we have alignment between how our culture enables the strategy and how the strategy delivers against the purpose for each of our stakeholder groups. Where we show up in external great places to work surveys, how we show up in client surveys, how we deliver financial results to the shareholders and how we serve our communities more broadly all have to be in balance, have equal standing and act in unison. We are in the 90 percentile of companies globally whose team members are aligned to the purpose, understand what it means and why it's important in their day-to-day role.

What advice do you have for tomorrow's leaders?

Understand the alignment between company strategy and what your culture needs to be to enable that strategy. Truly understand your team and what drives them to perform. Role model what culture you want to create in the company. For me, it's about being accessible, approachable, transparent. How your team works together is equally as important as what they work on and what they do. Align how you recognize and reward to what and how your people do things and the results will follow.

What are you most excited about for the future?

I'm really excited about how we are investing in leadership. I believe our next real evolution is to be known as a company that incubates, develops and fosters great leadership. Even as leaders potentially leave, we want them to go on to do great things as leaders more broadly in other organizations and the community.

MID-MARKET CATEGORY WINNER: RATANA STEPHENS, CO-FOUNDER AND CEO (RETIRED), NATURE'S PATH FOODS

What role has purpose played in building a high-performance team at Nature's Path?

My husband Arran and I founded Nature's Path in 1985. Our purpose from day one has been to leave the Earth better than we found it. For us, that means our products will always be 100 per cent organic. It means giving back. We operate on a triple bottom line, to be socially responsible, environmentally sustainable and financially viable, in that order. Our people want to make a difference and they connect our purpose to their own areas of performance. We are not for ourselves alone, we are part of communities. Our people strongly believe in this. They give their time and money to organizations in need and we offer matching funds in addition to supporting hospitals, food banks, students, food and land systems.

How do you balance a people-first focus with accountability?

We believe in servant leadership: you must consider the needs of others. That doesn't mean our team members are not accountable. We have created an awards program we call PATHS to reflect accountability in our organization. Performance driven. Always improving, Team focus, Honourable and respectful, Sustainability-driven. There are individual awards for each of the behaviours as well as an overall award. Without accountability we cannot deliver on our mission and vision to be socially responsible and environmentally sustainable. Profitability is the result of following our purpose, mission, vision and values.

What are you most excited about for the future?

I'm like a tree in the forest waiting for new growth to take over. My husband and I have stepped away from day-to-day operations. Arjan, our son, has taken over as president and our daughter, Jyoti, is vice-president of mission and strategy with a focus on sustainability. I am very grateful that our second generation is taking over and they are purpose-driven. There is more to happen, to see, to give.

GROWTH CATEGORY WINNER: CHIEF TERRY PAUL, MEMBERTOU DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

How do you show up in alignment with your administration's culture?

As a Mi'kmaq Indigenous-owned and led organization, Membertou's culture directly reflects our community values. We infuse Membertou culture into many aspects of our working operations. This includes all staff celebrating culturally important days to our people, such as National Indigenous Peoples' Day, and Treaty Day here in the Atlantic and in Nova Scotia. We are a people-centric organization that sees our employees as people first. We understand they have families and other responsibilities outside of



The 2023 Canada's Most Admired CEOs, clockwise from top left: Chief Terry Paul, Curtis Stange, Jennifer Gillivan, Rebecca Kacaba, Ratana Stephens, Rob Miller. PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY WATERSTONE HUMAN CAPITAL

their work. They know that ultimately, family and the community are the root of who we are, our corporate culture is understanding of that. I personally am very proud to run a business that holds close the values that our community embodies. I represent the community, whatever I'm doing is for them.

How do you define a high-performance culture?

The Membertou Development Corporation is purpose-driven. Our commercial revenue directly supports our community operations. We reinvest in ourselves to support our people and our future growth and, very importantly, our capacity. In the early days of my leadership, we started breaking down barriers for our community to access post-secondary education. Since then, we have seen an influx of our people who are now leaders in their own right for the community. Our investment in people's education and training has brought our organization many talented individuals who contribute to our culture and our success.

What are you most excited about for the future?

Our ownership stake in Clearwater Seafoods continues to bring new opportunities. Membertou recently invested in two green energy projects that are going to be game changers for our region. For the last 40 years I have led as chief and for more than a decade as the CEO. I'm excited to say we aren't slowing down any time soon. These projects are possible because of our culture, which is at the forefront of our thoughts and our actions.

EMERGING CATEGORY WINNER: REBECCA KACABA, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER, DEALMAKER

How do you balance a people-first focus with accountability?

In technology, there is a big drive in the early days toward finding product-market fit. You can't be all things to all people because you can't build everything. That applies to people and cultural fit. We try to be very clear about what DealMaker is: a high-performance culture where there is self-autonomy and people can do groundbreaking things. We want people to come here who want to learn and grow. My co-founder Matt has always said we want to leave a place better than we found it. We want that for people, too.

How do you define a high-performance culture at DealMaker?

I think a lot about the Uber example, when they were growing and they had a value of winning no matter what. At one point, that created an internally competitive and toxic environment. Being high-performing without toxicity is important in our values of playing as a team, leading by example, having one cohesive thought. So many people have to contribute to our success. A lot of it is culled from the Netflix ideology, where everyone is the boss of their own job and everyone makes their job and their role in the organization a little bit better every single day.

What are you most excited about for the future?

Our purpose is to make online capital raising mainstream. The capital markets have had big barriers up for a long time, with a select few allowed to make investments in the best companies. We're really proud that over 30 per cent of the founders accessing funding on our platform are women and minority founders. Whereas if you look at VCs, only two per cent of the

funding goes to women and minority founders. I think five, 10 years from now, when you have diverse founders and businesses getting funded and diverse investors, the economic impacts are huge. That's what I'm excited to see.

NON-PROFIT AND BROADER PUBLIC SECTOR CATEGORY WINNER: JENNIFER GILLIVAN, IWK FOUNDATION

How do you balance a people-first focus with accountability?

We are a nonprofit but operate like a social enterprise startup. We're scrappy, bold and we are all about our mission to improve children and women's health and research. We have sophisticated business planning and processes to bring out the best of our people and drive impact with a lot of measurement and accountability built in. Our three biggest groups are philanthropy, brand and strategy, and operations. They meet daily. I have a senior leadership meeting every second week. We have KPIs and when we report to the board or our donors, we are able to demonstrate impact, return on investment, cost per dollar. We all own the total number at the end of the day. We are having a great year and are humbled by the generosity of our donors.

What advice do you have for tomorrow's leaders?

I think now as a leader you are a cultural anthropologist, because you are constantly adapting and getting ahead of where people are. You have to have a high EQ as well as IQ. You have to be a constant learner. You have to like the challenge of change. It's all disrupting right now and there are some really good things coming. If people can do good work and have a bal-

anced lifestyle and be there for their families, that's a win for society.

What are you most excited about for the future?

I am very excited about the possibility of playing a role in creating specific research on women's bodies that in turn will help change health care for women. Women deserve a health-care system informed by research on women's bodies. Doctors are trained in medical schools around the world that the male is the standard norm, most of the research is based on that premise and is male-centric. Women are not alright; we deserve a health-care system that is designed for our bodies, and I hope to be a spark to help bring about this change and work with others to transform health care and research as we know it today. Our future depends on this change.

SOCIAL PURPOSE INNOVATOR CATEGORY WINNER: ROB MILLER, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER, MILLER TITERLE LAW CORPORATION

How have you been able to leverage your culture to drive social impact and organizational performance?

As a leader, it's my role to guide us into the future while keeping us grounded in our purpose, which for us is helping people do good things. That is to say, as we move forward, we have to bear in mind that social impact is not something extra we do in addition to our work — it is our work and the reason our organization exists. So for us, it's less about leveraging our culture to drive social impact and organizational performance and more about understanding that our culture, the social impact we have and how we perform as a firm are interconnected. If we create the right environment to attract the work that aligns with our values, our people believe in what they are doing, perform better, are happier, and find more of that work.

How do you define a high-performance culture?

We are a for-profit-business; dollars and cents and efficiency all play a role. But as we measure performance in our organization, it's about so much more than that. We have a set of cultural building blocks: team personship, gratitude and positivity, mindfulness, owner mindset, problem solving, authenticity and equitability. We defined those together and they set the parameters around how we need to show up for each other. If we can demonstrate those cultural building blocks while also living our purpose we're succeeding. That's real high-performance, and we find that the dollars and cents follow.

What are you most excited about for the future?

When I cast my eyes 30 years out I can see a future where reconciliation between Indigenous nations and the country of Canada unlocks development in a way that it has never been unlocked before. I see the way we interact with our resources changing as our environment changes. And I see massive demographics shifts in terms of who participates in the economy. All of this will fundamentally change Canada as we know it. I'm an optimist, and really believe all of these will be positive changes. I really believe our firm is positioned to be catalysts in that change — and that's what excites me.

“WE MET WITH OUR PEOPLE AND ASKED THEM WHERE THEY THINK WE ARE TODAY AND WHERE THEY WOULD LIKE US TO BE. FROM THAT WE CREATED A CULTURE ROADMAP AND PUT A STRUCTURE IN PLACE TO ESTABLISH WHERE WE ARE TODAY, WHERE WE WANT TO BE IN THE FUTURE, AND HOW WE CAN GET THERE AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS AN ORGANIZATION. – DAWN DEMERY, SVP AND CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, BCAA

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DRIVING A CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

BCAA

DENISE DEVEAU
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

Culture is an ongoing journey for the BCAA team, and so is purpose. “We talk every day about how we can serve more needs and make an even bigger impact,” says Eric Hopkins, president and CEO.

BCAA was established 118 years ago as a group of early motoring enthusiasts. The winner in the 2023 Canada’s Most Admired Non-Profit and Broader Public Sector category has grown to 1,400 employees serving over one million people in British Columbia online, by phone and in person through 33 retail locations. Its wide range of services includes roadside assistance, insurance, environmentally conscious mobility services (Evo Car Share, Evolve E-Bike Share) and auto service centres. But its impact goes much deeper through numerous community investments and programs focused on safety and protection which seek to build stronger, more connected communities.

“We describe ourselves as purpose-led, which we define as empowering British Columbians to move forward,” says Hopkins, who is a recent recipient of the Business in Vancouver CEO of the Year Awards.

While it has always had a strong cultural foundation, in 2016 BCAA’s leaders decided it was time to put more infrastructure behind it. “Over the last decade companies have learned the value of developing purpose and strategy,” says Dawn Demery, BCAA’s SVP and chief people officer.

Step one was talking to its people. Culture listening sessions were held to learn what values resonated across the team, resulting in an executive-endorsed “reset” of some core traits and a commitment to be intentional with its culture efforts.

“We met with our people and asked them where they think we are today and where they would like us to be,” says Demery. “From that we created a culture roadmap and put a structure in place to establish where we are today, where we want to be in the future, and how we can get there as individuals and as an organization.”

“Not only did we get great feedback on ways we could be better, but we also got clarity,” says Hopkins. “We didn’t only spend time on what we were doing well. We also devoted resources and energy to make sure everyone throughout the organization was engaged and felt



Photos above: Team members at BCAA’s Home Office and Auto Service Centre.

BCAA IMAGES

part of our culture.”

An important starting point was articulating its beliefs internally. BCAA’s beliefs are defined as Doing the Right Thing, The Power of Community, Putting People First, Protecting Our Home and Shaping the Future. Its values are embedded in the concepts of One BCAA, People First, Future Focus, and Clarity & Accountability.

Communications are an integral part of the culture journey. Leaders, including Hopkins, engage with team members in various ways including quarterly town halls supporting culture, purpose and strategy, creative and often lighthearted video shorts, storytelling and informal sessions with teams.

BCAA also introduced a culture toolkit to empower leaders to infuse the definition and language of the culture into strategies, conversations and decisions in areas such as expectations, goals and milestones and recognition.

Senior leaders take part in Culture Spotlights (leadership speaking panels), and foster culture through being accessible at peer support Employee Resource Groups, team building and social events and gatherings. They also serve as guest speakers

at every new hire orientation and many training sessions.

In addition, BCAA often invites team members into change projects that encourage innovation, risk-taking and growth, while its Change Hub fosters a culture that rewards experimentation and learns from failure.

“The programs we have in place touch every person. Leaders have to lead the culture and be open and transparent about what culture means in every interaction they have,” says Demery. “When others see the alignment, it inspires them and helps them focus on what they need to do.”

The organization boasts a successful track record in attracting and hiring new talent, following a process that assesses candidates on key attributes including cultural fit, innovation and creativity, customer centricity, and being results-driven. Employee referrals are highly successful, as is a new initiative called the Hiring Hub, which trains team members of various departments and tenures to join hiring managers in two-person panel interviews.

Once through the door, professional development is another core part of BCAA’s culture. The organization

has a full-time leadership coach and multiple programs to nurture the growth of its people. These include over 250 in-house training programs, professional development programming on emotional intelligence and self-awareness topics, and extensive leadership training offerings. Continuous learning is broadly supported throughout the year, through coaching, mentoring and immersive learning development.

Celebration and recognition are embedded into BCAA’s language and gatherings – from its Voices personal storytelling series on its intranet featuring accounts from team members on aspects of their personal lives such as wellness, mental health, or diversity experiences, to ‘shout outs’ at celebratory events. More formal recognition initiatives include a Bravo e-card peer recognition program for sharing immediate praise, and annual Going the Extra Mile (GEM) awards, which encourages team members to nominate individuals or teams for outstanding actions tied to cultural differentiators.

BCAA is also firmly committed to reflecting the diversity of the communities it serves. “As a people-first organization, attracting and

hiring top talent that reflects who we serve is crucial to our success,” says Demery. “We exist to meet the needs of everyone in B.C. and to do that effectively we need and value everyone’s voice and perspective. That means weaving diversity, equity and inclusion throughout our culture in service of living our purpose.”

In 2020, BCAA developed a more formalized diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategy, followed by hiring a permanent program manager. It has also established a DEI Advisory Committee, which plays a consultative role in shaping and sustaining DEI priorities and initiatives.

Four Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) provide communities for team members to collaborate, explore resources, learn and simply connect around shared interests, specifically cultural inclusion, working parents, mental health and wellness, and disability and neurodiversity.

Leadership and teams across the organization participate in and champion DEI initiatives through virtual lunch and learns and panel discussions, the Voices personal storytelling series, and an annual DEI survey.

In its commitment to advancing reconciliation, BCAA has also developed a multi-year Indigenous Inclusion strategy to attract and retain more Indigenous team members while creating space for non-Indigenous team members to learn, reflect and plan.

BCAA is firmly committed to supporting its communities, investing over \$1 million into protection and safety programs, initiatives and partnerships each year. In 2022 it launched the BCAA Gives Back online employee giving platform, where team members can find local opportunities to volunteer or donate. BCAA Gives Back awards team members with dollars to donate for each hour they volunteer and matches most personal monetary donations up to \$125 per team member each fiscal year. BCAA also provides one paid day off each year for volunteering.

For urgent situations such as B.C.’s catastrophic wildfires last summer, BCAA lends its corporate support and invites its members and the public to join in. BCAA donated \$100,000 and thanks to donations from its team and British Columbians, collectively raised a total of \$227,000 to support the Red Cross’s B.C. Wildfire Relief efforts. Last year it launched the BCAA Fire-Smart Initiative – a long-term partnership with Fire-Smart BC focused on wildfire prevention programs, education and reaching more vulnerable communities with practical knowledge and resources to help them become more resilient to wildfire.

“BCAA has always been a values-driven organization committed to doing good within communities,” says Hopkins. “What has changed over the years is putting discipline behind that, defining our purpose and applying actions and investment against it. Now we have a strong shared understanding amongst all our team members and we all pull together in ways that truly count – it’s part of our culture and it’s a powerful force for good.”

Focusing its efforts on evolving its culture has paid dividends for BCAA, with revenues doubling over the last five years. “We see that as real validation of our commitment to serving the needs of everyone in British Columbia and to giving back,” says Hopkins.

“Not only does high performance mean achieving specific business targets, but it also means we are giving more to our people, communities, environment and province than we’re taking, and bringing our purpose to life.”

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CANADA’S

MOST ADMIRABLE

CORPORATE CULTURES

2023

“CULTURE IS AT THE BASIS OF ALL WE DO BUT THERE IS NO ONE POLICY OR PROGRAM THAT IS GOING TO MAKE A GREAT CULTURE. IT IS ABOUT HOW YOU SHOW UP AND TREAT PEOPLE EACH DAY. AS WE CONTINUE TO GROW, WE OFTEN TALK ABOUT THE NEED TO KEEP WORKING ON CULTURE AND NOT TAKE IT FOR GRANTED.”

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MARY TERESA BITTI
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When Ugo Bizzarri co-founded real estate investment and property management business Hazelview Investments in 1999, he had a clear vision and purpose: to create value for people and places. He put culture at the core of delivering on this vision. Twenty-five years later, culture continues to drive the firm, which now employs a team of more than 750 people in 13 Canadian and four global cities, has \$12 billion in assets under management and has bought and sold 32,000 multi-residential units in Canada.

This year Hazelview Investments was named one of Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures by Waterstone Human Capital in recognition of the firm's winning culture.

At the core of its organizational culture is an entrepreneurial approach guided by its values of trust, ambition, collaboration, ownership mindset and having fun — all in service of people. For Hazelview, creating value is about more than recognizing good real estate and financial reward, it's about putting people and communities first in all that it does.

“Our culture ensures we stand out,” says managing partner, chief human resources and strategy officer, Vanessa Mian. “It's what helps us attract and retain high-performing talent and drive results. Our people are collaborative, driven, and passionate — and they stay. Our people and our culture are our competitive advantage.”

It is also a top priority. Culture is the first pillar of Hazelview's strategic plan. “We have three strategic long-term goals, with the first focused specifically on culture,” says Mian. “We believe that by prioritizing culture we will be better positioned to deliver on all our other strategies and ultimately for our clients. Culture is at the basis of all we do but there is no one policy or program that is going to make a great culture. It is about how you show up and treat people each day. As we continue to grow, we often talk about the need to keep working on culture and not take it for granted.”

The firm does more than just talk about culture. The leadership team is intentional about demonstrating the



Clockwise, from top: Team members at a community event in Toronto; Team members at a Hazelview property in Toronto; Team members at one of its annual summer parties. HAZELVIEW INVESTMENTS IMAGES

behaviours that define organizational culture and ensuring those behaviours cascade across the organization.

On the ground and in practice, this takes the form of engaged, accessible leadership and ongoing, honest, open communication across multiple channels. Hazelview holds frequent all-company and department meetings to ensure everyone has clarity around performance. It continuously seeks employee feedback through one-on-one meetings with leaders, regular employee surveys, focus groups, exit interviews and listening sessions.

“We create action plans based on what we learn to address opportunities to improve, which get incorporated in each department's annual plan. We circle back to employees to show them how we're responding and progressing,” says Mian. “This is critical to encourage a positive feedback loop, to reinforce our core value of collaboration, and to demonstrate our commitment to getting better.”

It is also an example of embodying the ownership mentality and the accountability that comes with being an owner, which is founda-

tional to Hazelview's culture.

“People are invested and care. They take pride in what they do and feel accountable not only for their work but also how their work impacts and contributes to others within the organization,” says Katie Chirka, partner, HR Operations. This is showcased through a recent employee survey which saw that 89 per cent of employees feel a sense of pride when they look at what they accomplish and that 87 per cent feel they make a difference at Hazelview.

This ownership mindset is further supported through initiatives such as Hazelview's Employee Co-Investment Program and its Ownership Program. The former offers employees the opportunity to invest in the funds managed by Hazelview and the latter offers employees the opportunity to become part owners of the business. Both programs enhance alignment to long-term interests and fuel the pursuit of excellence.

“We have high expectations of ourselves, as individuals, as a team,” says Mian. “We all come together cross-functionally to make sure we achieve at the highest level. At the same time,

we have an environment where people can make mistakes. There is a safety in how we hold each other accountable. Because we talk about our goals collectively, everyone knows what we're striving for and what we need to do. We don't leave problems to fester. We come together and work through what the plans need to be.”

This was exactly the case over the past year, as Hazelview — alongside others in the industry — had to adapt to a shifting economic landscape. “All teams came together to help each other and do what was needed. The focus was, how can we empower you to keep going when times are harder,” says Mian. “That was possible because of our ongoing, open communication and everyone feeling comfortable to discuss the good and the bad.”

It is also the result of the firm's long-demonstrated commitment to helping its people grow, professionally and personally.

“People gravitate to us and stay because they are continuously challenged, learning, and growing. That's part of the way we've structured our organization and designed our jobs,” says Chirka. “Our roles are broad,

allowing people more exposure and access to opportunities that they may not get elsewhere with a more siloed approach.”

Employees also have access to a variety of development opportunities and tools, including individual development plans, stretch assignments and special projects, rotation programs, mentorship opportunities (both formal and informal) along with educational reimbursements and education days if they want to pursue external programs.

Building on its people-first approach, Hazelview believes that differences make the organization stronger. Given that perspective, it was natural for the organization to put formal processes in place around diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) — a key focus for this year's Canada's Most Admired Corporate Culture honourees.

Over the last few years, Hazelview has taken many steps to advance in their DE&I journey in a way that feels authentic and embraced by their employees, such as establishing a dedicated DE&I task force and strategic framework, launching DE&I training across all areas and levels

of the organization, embedding DE&I and anti-bias best practices in its recruitment processes, providing access to a self-serve learning platform for employees to learn more about DE&I at their own pace, celebrating diversity throughout the year with guest speakers and events, and launching Belonging at Hazelview, a program to further support its organizational culture and the individual experiences of its people.

Today, internal company-wide surveys reveal: that the overwhelming majority of employees (88 per cent) understand Hazelview's DE&I strategy and agree that its DE&I training is promoting inclusivity and belonging at the firm (85 per cent). More than this, nearly 90 per cent agree they feel comfortable being themselves at work and 90 per cent-plus feel people are treated fairly at Hazelview regardless of their gender, age, race or sexual orientation.

Hazelview Cares, the firm's corporate social responsibility program, expands its commitment to people by working to ensure the health of the communities it serves through initiatives its team members help identify and shape. In 2023, more than 45 per cent of Hazelview's 750-plus employees participated in at least one Hazelview Cares Program, which includes more than 30 partnerships with non-profits, NGOs and industry peers. Hazelview Cares directly helped more than 3,900 people, via funding to support affordable housing, bursaries and scholarships, skilled trades apprenticeships, after-school young leadership programs, sustainability initiatives, and more. Beyond its partnerships, Hazelview also supports grassroots efforts created and delivered by its own people, including initiatives to support newcomers, advance STEM education for children, build community gardens and health programs. They are also working toward launching a Hazelview Cares Foundation to further support their CSR initiatives. These programs and initiatives are valued amongst their employees with 85 per cent agreeing they feel good about the ways Hazelview contributes to the community in a recent survey.

“For us it continues to boil down to our people because when they're happy, when they're engaged, when they feel supported and growing their careers, I think we all win,” says Mian. “With our culture and people, the sky's the limit.”

THIS STORY WAS CREATED BY CONTENT WORKS, POSTMEDIA'S COMMERCIAL CONTENT DIVISION, ON BEHALF OF HAZELVIEW INVESTMENTS.

“GENTLE TEACHING IS NOT JUST FOR THE PEOPLE WE SUPPORT, BUT FOR EVERYBODY. AT THE HEART OF IT ALL IS THE CONNECTIONS WITH PEOPLE. OUR TEAM IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR EACH OTHER AND THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLE WE SUPPORT. THAT’S WHY WE ARE ALL VERY PASSIONATE ABOUT WHAT WE DO.”

— AMANDA CLARKE, CHIEF CULTURE OFFICER, CREATIVE OPTIONS REGINA

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CHAMPIONING A GENTLE APPROACH TO CULTURE

CREATIVE OPTIONS REGINA

DENISE DEVEAU
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

When Amanda Clarke joined Creative Options Regina (COR) to take on the new role of director of people and culture in 2019, she knew there was something special about the organization. “I discovered I can go to work, have fun, and know at the end of the day that I am working on something more meaningful,” says Clarke, who is now chief culture officer. COR is a winner in the Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Cultures Awards’ Non-Profit and Broader Public Sector category.

Launched in Regina in 2009, COR serves a distinct role in the non-profit sector. It develops personalized support services for people experiencing disability. Rather than running group homes or placing individuals into programs, COR supports people living in their own homes, where they can discover their own talents and interests, live according to their own values, and strive to reach their personal goals.

What stood out for Clarke from the outset is the culture, she says. “The biggest change for me is the support of the people we work alongside day to day. That makes a huge difference in today’s workplace. While I am not on the front lines, our culture is also about serving our employees, bringing people together in a meaningful way, and building future leaders.”

Since its inception, the organization has embraced the philosophy of gentle teaching as an alternative approach to supporting people with disabilities. This culture of gentleness — which focuses on nurturing, teaching and sustaining the experience of connectedness, companionship and community — is woven into all aspects of the organization, from the people it hires and mentors, to the people supported and their family members.

“Gentle teaching is not just for the people we support, but for everybody,” says Clarke. “At the heart of it all is the connections with people. Our team is making a difference for each other and the lives of the people we support. That’s why we are all very passionate about what we do.”

COR also prides itself on its diversity. Currently, its employees represent upwards of 50 nationalities, many of whom recommend



COR team leader MacKenzie, together with the young man she supports. CREATIVE OPTIONS REGINA IMAGE

friends and family members to apply. “We have never had to advertise a position,” says Casey Sakires, employee experience advisor. “Our hires have all been by word of mouth. In fact, COR has never posted a frontline caregiver position. In the past year alone, we have received more than 450 applications.”

Diversity is recognized and nurtured in the form of panel discussions, special luncheons and celebrations of festivals near and dear to employees, such as Ramadan, Diwali and Indigenous rituals. As Dhvani Purohit, a team leader, noted, “I was never able to share or experience Diwali in Canada. The way COR has celebrated Diwali — including support with lights, decorations, food and, most amazingly, all the guests participating in traditional dance from my (Gujarat side Garba) — was an experience which I would never be able to share without COR.”

“The events highlighting people’s journeys are eye-opening and educational for everyone,” notes Clarke. “We can see the joy in them being able to share their stories with an audience. It’s the culture that makes it possible.”

Hiring for fit is integral to sustaining COR’s culture, says Sakires. “A culture that

makes people feel safe is so important in building relationships.”

Understanding individual personal values and how they align with COR’s values is the primary focus of the first interview, he explains. “We are looking for that value set — in essence people who want to make a difference in someone’s life and be that consistent person for the people we support and serve. Most of the people we do hire don’t have care experience but do have the heart and the values that make COR a success.”

Every new hire’s journey starts with 30 hours of shadowing and up to three months of mandatory training in the fundamentals of gentle teaching, working with people with complex health needs, and learning about critical areas such as mental health support and suicide prevention.

Within the first three months, employees also participate in a full-day orientation led by the CEO and COO to deepen their understanding of the history of COR, and the culture in which it embraces.

During onboarding, employees are registered for training programs emphasizing health and safety, including mental health, stress management and coping skills. COR’s train-the-train-

er approach delivers over 20 nationally recognized trainings offered in-house to all employees on paid time.

COR also offers incentives throughout the year, from bonuses and swag to personalized notes and appreciation days.

In 2023, the organization launched the COR Academy, an initiative that focuses on COR’s renewed vision to influence care more broadly. Through the COR Academy, training and development programs are offered to the broader community, alongside COR employees. The initiative also focuses on individual and organizational mentorship, offering internal and external mentorship from experienced leaders.

“People feel valued when we invest in developing their potential,” says Clarke.

“We are just at the initial stage of developing the academy,” she adds. “There is a lot of potential to reach a lot of people doing a lot of great things. We have an opportunity to influence others in a different way of thinking about care.”

Another critical element of its culture is the health and wellness support. “Psychological support in our field is important,” says Clarke. “Because caregiving is an emotionally demanding role, sometimes they may need to reduce hours

or have additional access to mental health resources. We understand that if we treat our caregivers well, we know the people we serve will be well cared for.”

The numbers tell a compelling story. COR’s yearly annual turnover rate has remained between four and 10 per cent since its inception — an impressive feat considering the average for the sector exceeds 35 per cent annually.

COR is also a consistent presence in the community at large. “A great deal of the team’s efforts are spent connecting with community,” says Sakires. He stresses that all charitable programs are employee-driven and based on interest, which drives strong participation and engagement. In the past year alone, COR employees have supported over 20 different non-profit/community organizations.

Community relationships include COR’s 4to40 inclusive employment initiative that works with businesses to champion the inclusion of people experiencing intellectual disability, a joint venture with the University of Regina in supporting diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) strategies of fellow Saskatchewan businesses.

In 2020, COR launched a “Short Breaks” initiative with Inclusion Regina and

the City of Regina to address the need for quality programming in a safe, supportive environment for family care providers.

The organization also partners with Indigenous educational programs, band offices and cultural groups. In 2021, COR developed an Indigenous culture advisor position, and all employees are enrolled in both Indigenous awareness and diversity training.

“All of these efforts strengthen our diversity and enrich our community connections,” says Sakires.

Tara Osipoff, vice chair of the Creative Options Regina board, notes “I’ve witnessed firsthand the profound impact of the gentle teaching practice at COR. It’s a practice that illuminates the culture with compassion and understanding, fostering an environment where both the people we serve and our dedicated employees feel valued, respected and loved. This nurturing atmosphere not only supports growth and healing but also empowers everyone involved to reach their full potential. It’s truly heartwarming to see the difference the gentle teaching philosophy makes through kindness and patience, reinforcing our belief that caring for one another with gentleness is the most powerful tool we have.”

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The 2023 Canada's Most Admired Chief People and Culture Officers, clockwise from top left: Cheryl Kerrigan, Christine Vigna, Norm Sabapathy, Shaun Simms, Stephanie Silver. PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY WATERSTONE HUMAN CAPITAL

'AT THE CENTRE OF MAKING THINGS HAPPEN'

CANADA'S MOST ADMIRABLE CHIEF PEOPLE AND CULTURE OFFICERS

MARY TERESA BITTI
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

* Responses have been edited for length.

All things lead to people. It's the reason Waterstone Human Capital launched the Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures Awards program 20 years ago, followed by Canada's Most Admired CEO Awards program 10 years ago. "If you get your people and culture strategy right, your business will grow," says Lyn Currie, Waterstone Human Capital's managing director, executive search.

"Chief people and culture officers are at the centre of making that happen. The role has evolved far beyond human resources operations. This is a business strategy role. We see now the CPCO is at the right hand of the CEO. It's time we celebrate the leaders of people and culture."

This year's inaugural Canada's Most Admired CPCO honourees are defining, transforming and fostering culture. They are investing in their employee brand to attract and retain the right talent. They are building diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging initiatives alongside learning and development programs to create environments where everyone is empowered to be their true self and has equal access to opportunity. They are ensuring people and culture are aligned to business strategy, and helping direct and influence their CEOs and boards.

Here are the 2023 Waterstone Human Capital Canada's Most Admired Chief People and Culture Officer Award winners.

ENTERPRISE CATEGORY WINNER: NORM SABAPATHY, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, PEOPLE, COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY, CADILLAC FAIRVIEW CORPORATION

What was your biggest challenge over the last year?

We own shopping malls, office buildings, multi-family residential and industrial properties. Through COVID, shopping malls were shuttered and people stopped going into offices. So, our biggest challenge has been recovering our mall and office business while we scale our multi-family and industrial businesses. Culture and capability is one of three pillars of our corporate strategy and we ensured talent alignment to strategy, developed new capabilities, and identified specific behaviours to evolve, like "embracing change", "taking smart risks", and "engaging with empathy", to help drive performance across our business. This is making a difference; for example, today sales in our shopping malls across Canada are ahead of where they were pre-pandemic.

How do you attract and retain exceptional talent?

We focus on our value proposition, which has five pillars: great culture, interesting work, strong

reputation, total rewards, and commitment to building leaders. One area we continue to grow is ensuring we attract and retain diverse talent in a way that is ingrained in our culture and grounded in objective. For example, we measure talent attraction, retention and inclusion (i.e., do people feel like they can be themselves and also be included and make a difference?) throughout the talent pipeline and by organizational level. We assess that data against Canadian, North American and global benchmarks. Based on data, we know CF is representative of the communities in which we operate, with the sole exception of Indigenous representation, and is around the top quartile for inclusion against a global multi-industry benchmark. We also analyze data intersectionality and, for example, know if an employee feels included at CF, they are 19 times more likely to be engaged.

How do you see the role of chief people and culture officer evolving?

My role is to maximize the effectiveness of people to deliver business results. That won't change. But given the evolving technology landscape, including generative AI, HR plays a central role in helping organizations navigate change and deliver strategy, while keeping the "human" in human resources.

MID-MARKET CATEGORY WINNER: CHERYL KERRIGAN, CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, BLUECAT

What was your biggest challenge over the last year?

BlueCat is a tech company. Our culture is innovative, we celebrate collaboration and working together. Last year we acquired two companies and went from 350 employees to 550. We had to make sure our culture was still relevant. We had to look at what are the non-negotiables but also what are we willing to flex on as we grow or face challenges. What are the goals of the organization and how does culture have to shift to achieve them? We had to look at the existing culture of the acquired companies and ensure that we had alignment moving forward. Merging three companies together proved challenging as everyone identifies with the culture that they are accustomed to. We had to be very purposeful to ensure that every employee felt connected and committed to the new vision.

Beyond financial, how do you measure success in your role?

Are people showing up? Are they engaged? Do they say we're a great place to work? We test ourselves internally and externally via engagement surveys and benchmark against ourselves every year. I look at the full employee lifecycle, how do we get people in, how do we keep them and when they leave, are they leaving on good terms, will they still recommend us as an employer? During exit interviews, when we ask, 'what are you going

to miss about us?', 90 per cent say the people. There is a cohesiveness, people enjoy the people they work with and want to help each other out. We've had several boomerang employees. In 2019, we slipped significantly on engagement scores. I reported to the board about what was going on and how we were going to address the engagement issue. I had to be accountable and responsible for finding out why and then improving. Thankfully the scores the following year recovered due to our focused efforts.

How do you see the role of chief people and culture officer evolving?

AI is going to disrupt our workplaces. We are still going to see the collapse of geographies and a lot of people hired from all over the world. The whole idea of how we work and what we're focused on and the skillsets we're looking for will look dramatically different in the next 10 years. The CPCO will be at the forefront of all of that.

GROWTH CATEGORY WINNER: CHRISTINE VIGNA, CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, DEJERO LABS INC.

What's your role in culture?

Employees are looking to their leadership level as the north star for workplace culture. That includes the language we use, how work gets done, how we handle challenging situations and also how we celebrate each other. We have a very respectful and kind environment at Dejero that is hyper focused on our goals. We know our employees thrive with technical challenges, they want to feel they've accomplished something great at the end of the day. We all do. With that, we need folks to feel safe and to take risks. We are a technology company, so if people don't feel comfortable being innovative, they are not going to take the risks we need them to.

What impact is your organization's focus on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging having on talent acquisition and retention?

This focus has been instrumental in our ability to attract and retain key talent. Our retention rate is about three times the national average retention rate in the technology sector. Our philosophy is — it's our responsibility to ensure we're upholding an environment where folks feel respected, safe, where they can share their opinions free from judgment or reprisal, where they can show up as their authentic selves. Just as importantly, we are a pay-for-performance culture and it's up to us to create an environment where employees know they will be treated fairly with respect to remuneration and opportunities. Our most recent employee engagement survey showed that 94 per cent of employees feel they can be their authentic selves; 98 per cent feel Dejero has created a culture of respect, inclusivity and equality; 93 per cent feel we do a good job supporting employee

mental health.

How do you see the role of chief people and culture officer evolving?

CPCOs will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of work. This is especially true as we look at the intersection of AI and how we work and how we maintain the human aspects of what we're doing.

EMERGING CATEGORY WINNER: STEPHANIE SILVER, VICE PRESIDENT, PEOPLE AND CULTURE, NORTH STRATEGIC, NOTCH VIDEO & MSL GROUP

As a leader, how do you balance a people-first focus with accountability?

I think the two go hand in hand. Being a leader who is clear with their teams on what their expectations are and holding them accountable to those expectations is not in conflict with being people-first. We have specific career progression guidelines that are shared across the entire organization. These are detailed descriptions of what's expected at each level. That gives people clear goals. They know what they're striving for, what to focus on. A few years ago, we launched transparent salary bands internally, so everyone knows what to expect and to ensure we are being equitable.

How have you helped your organization attract and retain exceptional talent?

We prioritize our people, we are committed to DEIB and we invest in our development. We have augmented our benefits offerings to ensure plans are holistically supportive. This includes a bigger focus on mental health benefits and resources and support for contraception and fertility treatment, and gender-affirming care beyond what is provided by provincial health insurance coverage. Everyone involved in the hiring process completes an inclusive hiring course. Our talent acquisition team uses gender-neutral language, we present at least one female and one BIPOC candidate on the shortlist for every open role, and we partnered with schools and other organizations to broaden the talent pool. In 2023, over 60 per cent of new hires identified as female, over 60 per cent as BIPOC. Learn new stuff is a core value and investing in development and promoting from within is one of the key drivers of employee retention. Our latest engagement survey shows 88 per cent of employees said they can imagine growing their career here.

How do you see the role of chief people and culture officer evolving?

HR by nature is often at the forefront of challenging situations. Societal changes, especially given the range and frequency of tough global events, have a direct im-

pact on teams and workplaces. It requires us to be even more transparent, empathetic and open about our goals and values, where we want to get to and how we're going to do it. We are strategic partners with a seat at the table.

NON-PROFIT AND BROAD-PUBLIC POLICY CATEGORY WINNER: SHAUN SIMMS, CHIEF PEOPLE, COMMUNICATIONS AND STRATEGY OFFICER, OTTAWA COMMUNITY HOUSING

As a leader, how do you balance a people-first focus with accountability?

We are a social housing provider and a lot of our employees are drawn to Ottawa Community Housing because we have a strong social purpose. At our organization, culture is part of our operational strategy. For us, people first is about trust and creating an environment where employees can perform at their best. Accountability is infused in our core competencies, which articulate the behaviours we want to see in the workplace that are in alignment with our values and that are necessary for our success. We recently refreshed these competencies through an inclusive lens approach so each leader and worker has a set of competencies for their roles that also makes them accountable for creating a culture of inclusion and belonging.

What's next for your people and culture strategy?

The motivating factors for employees have changed since the pandemic. Our employees are looking more holistically at their lives and their work environment. We recently refreshed our culture roadmap to include hybrid work, enhance health and wellness programs and focus on how we attract and retain talent. We are now looking to solidify key performance indicators to help us measure the progress of our culture journey. We are rolling out a self-identification survey to learn more about the demographics of our workforce, and we're looking to develop KPIs to assess the effectiveness of inclusive practices and identify areas of opportunity to promote positive change within the corporation.

How do you see the role of chief people and culture officer evolving?

The role is increasingly being seen as a strategic business partner, providing insights and guidance on how to align our people and culture to overall business objectives. We will continue to focus on employee experience, prioritizing learning and development to ensure we have the required skills as we move forward into the future. I see my role being called upon more in a much bigger way to ensure the organization is leveraging all of that to inform decision-making.

“WE’LL CONTINUE BUILDING ON [OUR] GROWTH, AND THE PRIMARY PREMISE THAT PEOPLE NEED TO FEEL VALUED, EMPOWERED, AND ACCOUNTABLE TO ACHIEVE RESULTS. I’M HUMBLLED BY HOW DEDICATED OUR EMPLOYEES ARE AND HOW THEY TRULY FEEL ABOUT THE CULTURE AND OPPORTUNITIES TO GROW.

— CAROLINE STEPHENS, CHIEF PEOPLE AND CULTURE OFFICER, INTERAC CORP.

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PEOPLE-CENTRIC APPROACH

INTERAC CORP.

WENDY HELFENBAUM
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

Fintech trailblazer Interac Corp., a 2023 winner in Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Cultures Mid-Market category, is fueled by a talented workforce. Dovetailing its vision to empower Canadians to be in control of their money, the company believes that encouraging its small but mighty team of about 750 employees to live their best lives inspires them to do their best work.

Known as #InteracLife, this key philosophy represents Interac’s value proposition to potential and current workers. Since its founding in 1984 as an association, then an interbank network and now a gateway connecting 30 million-plus Canadians with hundreds of financial institutions, Interac has evolved and expanded with intention.

The financial services brand is undergoing an agile transformation to scale effectively, flatten its organizational structure and promote working within cross-functional teams to design more opportunities for its workers to grow and excel.

The company’s workforce has increased by more than 300 per cent in the past five years. It hired more than 250 new employees in 2023 and is currently recruiting for more than 50 roles. This robust growth demonstrates the relevance and value of the Interac mission, where leaders are ambassadors, mentors, and cheerleaders, says Caroline Stephens, chief people and culture officer at Interac.

“We lead with empathy, setting the tone for our culture of integrity, accountability, innovation, collaboration, and pride,” explains Stephens, noting that Interac works with its leaders to ensure they’re investing in their teams by providing personalized growth and development opportunities.

WELCOMING NEW COLLEAGUES WITH OPEN ARMS

The human-centric model is present from the first interaction prospective Interac employees have with the team. From the outset, people managers highlight the company’s commitment to wellness and personalized growth opportunities.

“We send them a video about our perks and benefits and why people love working here. It’s not about the title you hold, it’s about the value



Interac employees collaborating within the Interac office in Toronto. INTERAC CORP. IMAGE

you bring,” explains Stephens.

The comprehensive Interac onboarding process offers new team members immediate access to benefits and perks including a competitive total rewards program and a buddy to help them navigate the workplace and create camaraderie within the organization.

Feeling connected to the company’s purpose drives a positive culture. Client strategy leader Sasha Rana, who joined Interac last spring, says she was drawn to the company because it’s a trusted Canadian brand at the forefront of innovation, and where she felt immediately embraced by the organization’s culture.

“There’s a genuine sense of ownership, collaboration and support that comes through from every person across all the teams I’ve worked with. It’s a close-knit team culture where people really care, you feel valued and you make an impact every day,” says Rana.

ENGAGEMENT BASED ON LONG-TERM CAREER TRAJECTORY

By investing in its most precious resource — people — Interac helps ensure employees stay and grow with the organization. “We’ve built out a robust learning and development strategy to support our staff’s future career growth, with internal and external mentorship programs, talent assessments, volunteering opportunities, and payments learning,” explains Stephens.

One exciting initiative on the horizon is an opportunity marketplace platform within Interac’s human resources management system that allows people to see when new working groups supporting future programs will be put

together and staff can put their names forward to participate.

“Not only do they have the opportunity to progress up a particular vertical, but they will also learn laterally and build their own skill set in a broader way while still managing a certain area of expertise. This is how we can remain a highly adaptable organization where members of our team can bring a depth and breadth of expertise to any given project,” says Stephens.

BENEFITS THAT ENCOURAGE WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Rana says the Interac Total Rewards program — which includes hybrid work options, reduced summer schedules, quiet hours, and tuition assistance — was a deciding factor for her during her job search.

“As a parent to a three-year-old, the flexible work environment has been invaluable, allowing me to spend important moments with my family and also plan a productive workday where I go in with purpose,” she says. “Perks like summer hours and daily quiet hours give employees time and space to grow, learn, and focus on their work — which makes us feel valued and appreciated. This motivates me to give 110 per cent at work every day.”

Professional development programs include LinkedIn Learning, Interac Job Architecture, a framework designed to provide transparency on all Interac roles and role requirements for purposes of employee-driven career pathing, talent assessment and emerging talent identification, advanced leadership and high-performance team effectiveness development, and

financial wellness sessions, to name a few.

A WORKPLACE WHERE EVERYONE BELONGS

Rana appreciates how Interac promotes inclusivity; she quickly joined the D&I council and Women’s Employee Resource Group leadership team.

“I’ve seen firsthand how these social and culture committees are committed to fostering a sense of belonging; Interac helps build a sense of community where people can be themselves, learn from their peers and drive continuous growth,” she says.

Interac launched an ambitious D&I project in 2019, focused on employees, community and industry. It implemented mandatory anti-racism training for employees and builds diverse talent pipelines for underrepresented communities through its partnerships with CAUFP, Pride at Work and Black North Initiative. Interac also supports organizations including Indigenous Friends Association, and the Conscious Economics HeART-work Solutions Framework.

Interac has since been certified by Diversio, which works with organizations to improve their inclusion efforts.

FOCUSED ON FEEDBACK

Determined to reduce organizational ‘red tape’ that can prevent employees from succeeding, Interac uses feedback mechanisms, so everyone has a voice.

“One powerful mechanism is ThoughtExchange — a platform where employees are invited to provide their thoughts on any given question or topic. In addition, em-

ployees are able to vote on the importance of other people’s thoughts, which allows us to understand the most important feedback across participants. This feedback is critical insight that informs organizational thinking and outcomes,” explains Stephens. “We’re constantly innovating so we can deliver the best for those teams. Over the last couple of years, we’ve made meaningful progress in strengthening our culture and maintaining low attrition rates as a result.”

Interac celebrates and recognizes employees’ efforts and achievements through various platforms, including Bucketlist, which allows anyone to recognize good work across the network in real time.

“It’s meant to be an instant thank-you for work well done and can be a simple kudos on the platform for everybody to see right up to awarding \$1,000 for major work that exemplifies the values of the organization,” says Stephens, adding that employees are also recognized through town halls, newsletters and social media. “If people feel valued and empowered to contribute, the degree of intrinsic satisfaction they derive drives productivity, retention, high engagement and pride.”

TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNICATION BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER

Because Interac provides many opportunities for engagement and development including town halls, Ask Me Anything virtual sessions, intranet updates and newsletters, and after-work get-togethers, Rana feels seen and heard at all levels.

“Town halls stand out to

me the most — the energy and camaraderie at these events is palpable, and they offer a fantastic opportunity to connect with colleagues from different teams while learning about company achievements and goals,” she says. “At my first town hall, there were moments where employees were cheering in the auditorium. I’d never experienced a town hall like this before.”

MOVING FORWARD BY GIVING BACK

Interac is committed to supporting the communities where they live and work, including more than 50 Canadian charities. Since 2021, its corporate citizenship team has built out a robust social impact strategy to help Canadians build their financial confidence, notes Stephens.

For example, Mindfulness & Money, a digital learning program built by Conscious Economics in partnership with Interac, has supported more than 150,000 Canadians in their financial confidence journey. Interac has also collaborated with ACCES Employment, an organization that helps new immigrants find meaningful work within Canada, for four years, mentoring hundreds of newcomers and hiring more than 10. “I’m also very proud of our employee giving and volunteer efforts. In December, our employees raised over \$125,000 for charitable organizations through our annual Giving Week campaign, and our organization matched every dollar.”

LAYING FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

No strategy can be successful without measurable goals, and when Interac kicked off its culture evolution in 2018, it began tracking current and desired values to help define its commitments and actions. Since 2021, its culture score increased by 58 per cent. This assessment allowed Interac to refine its culture roadmap, identify key pillars and prioritize activities.

By emphasizing employee wellness, trust and flexibility, Interac has earned its status as one of Canada’s most admired corporate cultures, says Stephens. “We’ll continue building on this growth, and the primary premise that people need to feel valued, empowered, and accountable to achieve results. I’m humbled by how dedicated our employees are and how they truly feel about the culture and opportunities to grow,” she says.

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“TRUST IS THE BACKBONE OF OUR CULTURE. YOU NEED TO CARE ABOUT PEOPLE AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, BE GENUINE IN THE CARING OF THESE PEOPLE. YOU MUST EARN YOUR TEAM’S TRUST AND EMPOWER THEM TO MAKE DECISIONS.

– DAN TURNER, XPERIGO PRESIDENT AND CEO

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As a third-time winner in the Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Culture Awards Growth category, Xperigo president and CEO Dan Turner is never one to take the company’s culture successes for granted.

“Culture must continue to evolve. We can’t continue to do the same thing. The market, society in general, and priorities — everything changes.”

For almost three decades, Xperigo has been a premium provider of end-to-end automotive mobility services for automotive brands around the world, from roadside assistance and data insights to concierge and mobile services.

Turner took on the CEO role in December 2019, after spending years honing his leadership skills. Like many leaders, his world changed dramatically in March 2020. “I thought I had a full toolkit on how to lead. With COVID, we had to throw all of that out the window.”

Those challenging times changed the landscape in ways companies could never imagine, he adds. “COVID shone a light on things we would never have considered before. One thing it taught me is that what we thought were important in previous years were not anymore.”

The company established two priorities, he notes. “Number one was making sure our people are healthy and happy, and second, that the company is happy, and everybody can stay.”

To achieve that, the team realized that Xperigo would need to transition from a culture-focused organization to a culture-driven one built on teamwork, respect and trust. “We realized that empowerment, belonging and feeling



you are a part of something bigger was important to the culture here,” says Turner. “So when COVID ended we decided, why not continue caring about people and their welfare, including outside of the organization?”

The outcome was a three-year strategic plan that included culture as one of its five key pillars of success — a first in the company’s 30-year history. And true to its promise, it managed to weather the pandemic without having to lay off any employees.

An important part of the Xperigo culture is asking people what they want, and how the company can make that happen, says Chris Gravelle, vice-president, customer experience. “Transparency is key. It’s about talking to your people and making sure they understand they are appreciated and that they matter. When we can’t do something, we tell them why. They may not love the answer but respect the fact we answered it.”

Xperigo also boasts a strong diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) policy that fosters all team members’ unique perspectives, experiences and contributions. This commitment encompasses a wide range of support programs, task



Top photo: Xperigo Team Members celebrate Diwali. Photo above: Xperigo president/CEO Dan Turner presents Xperigo’s Rising Star Award to Sezer Aziz. XPERIGO IMAGES

forces, training and development offerings, cultural and educational events, and benefits.

One key initiative that has met with resounding success has been its Work from Anywhere program that allows team members an opportunity to work in their home country for up to eight weeks per year, allowing them to stay connected with friends, family and their culture.

With these changes, Turner believes that the culture is thriving even stronger than

before. “When COVID started, we all decided to protect each other and our families and make sure the company continues to do well. That rallying cry of everyone supporting each other led to more collaboration than ever. No matter difficult things became, everyone committed to fighting through it.”

With the pandemic in the rearview mirror, that rallying cry remains. “We continue to inspire and motivate ourselves to have that resilience and support. It’s now more

of purpose-led journey where people can all get behind it and work towards something bigger than just making a profit,” Turner says.

One of the areas Turner is most proud of is the level of trust that team members have in their leaders. “Trust is the backbone of our culture. You need to care about people and, more importantly, be genuine in the caring of those people. You must earn your team’s trust and empower them to make decisions.”

This has been especially critical during a time when the automotive industry has struggled, he adds. “Even when times have been bad we share that with the team, giving them a vision of how we will get out of it and when. If everybody trusts each other, they will send support and root for each other’s success.”

Listening to others through casual coffee chats, focus groups, town halls and monthly video chats will continue to be critical to future success, he believes. “Every story is unique. Hearing about our people’s lives and how things have changed for them allows us to make good decisions.”

Jeff Gallon, chief operating officer, notes that conversations with employees often

revolve around how culture can drive performance, regardless of the market. “Culture is what makes us agile and resilient. A strong culture also fosters innovation. When employees are motivated, empowered and can operate in a culture that meets their basic needs, they become more creative and able to contribute moving forward.”

Leaders are not in the trenches every day, says Gallon. “We are enablers. Our job is to remove impediments and ensure teams are positioned for success. They set the direction and timelines rather than management putting an arbitrary stake in the ground. We trust they will get it done. When you provide that level of autonomy, people will commit to delivering.”

The fact that Xperigo saw a 100 per cent retention rate for its software development team in 2022 during ‘the great resignation’, when competition for technical talent was fierce, is a testament to that approach.

Another point of pride is the resilience shown throughout the most difficult times for the company and the industry, notes Turner. “Nothing has been as challenging for the company as the last three years. But no matter what happens, we are always looking at how to solve problems together. Overall, we feel optimism and positivity that we will fight back and be successful again. We know we on the precipice of another growth stage.”

Having received a Corporate Culture Award for the third consecutive time demonstrates that Xperigo team members are invested in ensuring it will continue to be a successful organization, says Turner. “Even with this three-peat, the Xperigo team is far from done elevating our corporate culture even higher. Some CEOs have said we have nowhere to go but down at this point. I say to them, ‘maybe we just don’t know how good we could be.’”

XPERIGO PUTS WELLNESS AT ITS CULTURAL CORE

At Xperigo, taking care of its people is very much a part of taking care of business. Among many employee-focused initiatives, Xperigo’s talent & culture team developed the Wellness Wheel in 2023, demonstrating its commitment to the overall personal and professional wellness of their most valued asset.

“We wanted to offer a number of different programs to ensure we were

meeting employee needs not just at work but on other levels and tie it all together,” says Amy Gaba, vice-president, talent & culture. “We really started to look at all our programs, benefits, perks, training and things we do as an organization, and tie that back to our people.”

The Wellness Wheel encompasses eight dimensions essential to well-being: physical, mental, fi-

nancial, social, spiritual, occupational, environmental, and intellectual. One integral initiative that speaks to multiple dimensions of the Wellness Wheel is Xperigo’s Work from Anywhere policy, which allows employees eight weeks to work in their home country.

“It hits on a number of aspects for them, including mental, financial, spiritual and social health,” says Gaba. “We allow them those free-

doms, so they don’t have to choose between work and their personal lives.”

Employees are more committed to the organization because of the flexibility Xperigo offers, she adds. “We are not just asking of them. They are asking of us — it’s a give and take relationship.”

Praneeth Thumma, senior salesforce developer, says the culture has given him enough time to focus on work and pursue his personal interests. “I had more room to take care of my well-being. The most important thing is that I feel valued. Every voice is heard

and respected. My father was a doctor, so being available for and supporting others became important to me. Xperigo shares the same values.”

Xperigo also focuses heavily on building team member knowledge, through standard leader-led and self-directed training.

The company’s investment in continuous learning and growth stood out for Mansy Ralhan, manager, product innovation. “From day one it was all about what you want, where you want to go, and how they can help you with that. They have stayed true to that promise.

Since joining the team in 2021, I have been promoted twice.”

She is not alone in her commitment to her job. “Our team is so passionate about what they do. We genuinely care for each other and are excited about our work. We have the flexibility to make decisions and feel valued for what we do. There is a lot of gratitude when you are allowed that autonomy.”

“This is not something we do because we think it looks great to have a logo on site,” says Gaba. “It’s about trying to make everyone’s lives here and outside of the company better.”

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