

LEVERAGING CULTURE TO DRIVE PERFORMANCE

MARY TERESA BITTI
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

The Canadian economy is at an inflection point as organizations continue to reset and find their footing post-pandemic. During a time of high uncertainty, business models and ways of working were adjusted, with the focus on keeping people safe, happy and healthy but, in some cases, without clear links to putting people first and driving outcomes.

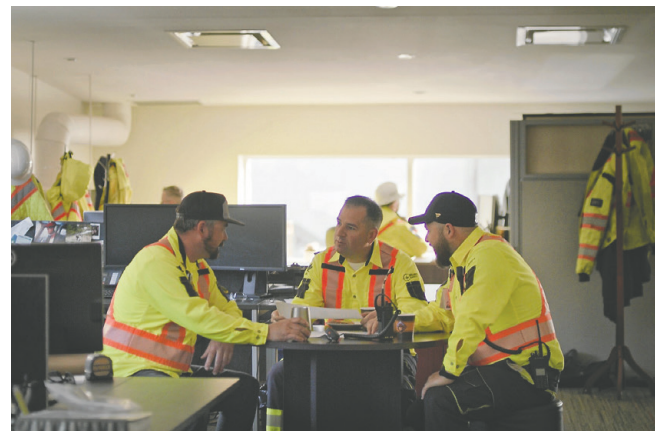
“When pendulums swing in business, it takes time for organizations to come back fully. This year’s Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Cultures Award winners have proven they are focused on doing the right things for their people while driving productivity,” says Marty Parker, president and CEO of Waterstone Human Capital, and founder of the Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Cultures program. “They are leveraging people-first strategies and tactics to build trust and accountability, encourage and support learning and leadership development, and fuel growth and innovation.”

Specifically, this year’s winners are connecting people and culture to organizational objectives. They are prioritizing transparency, encouraging and actioning employee feedback, and becoming much more deliberate in understanding each employee’s purpose — and connection to the organization’s purpose. They are developing robust recruitment and onboarding programs to ensure alignment with organizational values and purpose. They are identifying, prioritizing and developing innovative learning and mentorship opportunities for employees who have demonstrated a desire to grow. They are looking to the future and investing in systems and technologies such as AI to drive efficiency, productivity and innovation, as well as to attract and retain top talent. And they are regularly taking the pulse of their cultures and putting data to work to ensure engagement, job satisfaction and performance.

“Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Cultures winners are investing in human capital, labour composition and innovation,” says Parker. “When you focus on these areas, you are going to see great outcomes.”

ENTERPRISE CATEGORY WINNER: LONGO’S

In 2026, Longo’s will celebrate its 70th anniversary. The 41-store grocery chain was founded by three brothers who built a culture around treating people like family. That culture continues to inform every interaction, discussion and decision, says company president Deb Craven. “It comes to life by being honest, trustworthy, demonstrating mutual respect, and voglia, that’s about passion, perseverance, whatever it takes to get things done for the guest or for your team members and bringing that to work every day.”



Clockwise from top left: Longo’s team members at Kitchener, Ont., store opening participating in its version of a ribbon-cutting, the “apple-biting ceremony”; Security Compass Winter All Hands session, 2025; collaboration and team work at its best at QSL; The Coconut Software team at its Making Waves Company Retreat in 2022.

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MID-MARKET CATEGORY WINNER: QSL INTERNATIONAL

How do we continue to grow after the founder leaves? That was the challenge Robert Bellisle faced when he became CEO of QSL International in 2016. By that point, the company was 38 years old and well-established as a key supply-chain player in terminal operations, stevedoring, marine services, logistics and transport throughout North America.

The answer: Turn to the data to build the systems to drive excellence and employee satisfaction.

In 2018, QSL launched Project Data to better understand the KPIs around safety, operations and finance. They worked with a local firm to build Tracking Cargo 3, an entirely new enterprise resource planning system tailored specifically to QSL. “We hired business intelligence analysts to make sure everybody had easy access to the results they needed. That allowed us to leapfrog in our growth because we have the data necessary for people to do their jobs and continuously improve.”

In 2021, QSL launched Imperium, a program that has allowed the company to set itself apart in the areas of environmental sustainability, health and safety. Specifically, it got to work earning internationally recognized certification for its ports in each of these areas, including Green Marine, ISO 14001 (environmental management systems), ISO 45001 (occupational health and safety).

“We created Project Harmony to make sure we deliver the employee experience we want all of our people to have: fun, innovative, always improving. Our slogan is Certified Routine-Free Work. We create opportunities that are interesting and allow you to learn and do new things.”

In addition to external training and education programs, the company also launched QSL University and

a layered learning structure to support people throughout their careers — from onboarding to frontline operations to middle, general and senior management. Staff are encouraged to discuss their career path objectives with their manager, have access to career counselling and to one-on-ones with HR to discover the full spectrum of opportunities at QSL. “We are trying to put all the momentum in place so that people can see a path forward here.”

The result: In 2023 and 2024, 20 per cent of new hires came from employee recommendations. Over the past eight years, QSL has achieved double-digit compound annual growth rate, and almost tripled revenue and profits.

GROWTH CATEGORY WINNER: SECURITY COMPASS

Security Compass helps build more secure software by design. This is typically not the case in cybersecurity, where people build systems first and then try to make them safe, says CEO Rohit Sethi. “Usually, security breaches can be prevented if security best practices had been in place. That’s what we help people do. If we can effect more change, we can have many fewer cases of data being stolen. That’s one example. There are also safety issues in vehicles, industrial control systems and utilities, etc., that we are having an impact on. That opportunity doesn’t exist everywhere. To have this capability to help society at large but still in a for-profit company is remarkable. That’s why people stay.”

Purpose is a defining aspect of the culture at Security Compass, which is codified in its core values: customer focus, collaboration, ownership, authenticity and respect. While culture is now part of the company’s DNA, it wasn’t always this way.

“We began as a consulting company. Those security consultants would have so many

job offers, it was hard to compete. That is when we started to focus on culture and took steps to formalize it.”

Today, engagement is a KPI tied to executive compensation, as well as the overall company bonus. It is also one of the topics of the monthly town halls, alongside the state of the business, how the company is doing against its goals and an open Q&A. “When engagement wanes everybody knows, and the engagement committees focus on what needs to improve in individual departments and the entire company. We take actions to make sure we are listening to the feedback we’re getting from team members.”

Security Compass has prioritized development, retention and fostering an environment of knowledge-sharing. Its multi-faceted learning and growth program includes external training, internal, cross-functional mentorship, and career coaching. “For us, it’s important to ask what’s best for you in your career independent of whether that’s here. If it is here, great, but even if it’s not, it’s incumbent on the manager to work with their direct report to foster skills and experience,” says Sethi. “Knowing we supported them, they are likely to become referrals to customers or other employees.”

EMERGING CATEGORY WINNER: COCONUT SOFTWARE

CEO Katherine Regnier founded Coconut Software to simplify how financial institutions connect with their valued customers. “As customers, it should be effortless to get what you need,” she says.

Today, the customer engagement platform offers appointment scheduling, video banking, lobby management, and branch optimization products to banks and credit unions across Canada and the U.S., and now services 50 million end users.

Continued, see Culture, FP6

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HONOURING THE BEST AT BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL CORPORATE CULTURE

CULTURE
Continued from FP5

Regnier credits the company's success to its team and their embracing of Coconut Software's cultural values: Collaboration, Honesty, Empathy, Elevation, Respect and Service Excellence (CHEERS). "We live these values every day, and that has allowed us to build an environment based in trust."

That trust and accountability is captured in multiple ways: For instance, the company shares — in real time — its captain's log of all department metrics across the organization. Any staff member, board member or investor can access this key information. Plus, performance reviews take place throughout the year, radical candor (a.k.a. 'Pina Colada moments') is encouraged, and team shoutouts are shared frequently — which are always tied to one of Coconut's core values.

"Our staff is naturally curious; they have an entrepreneurial spirit. We give them the goals of what the business needs to achieve. That is what gives them the confidence to solve problems in creative ways."

Coconut also drives innovation. The company has monthly hackathons and launched a product ambassador committee, which encourages every person from across the entire organization to come to the table and share new ideas.

The company also elevates its employees through a focus on personal development, as evidenced by its regular one-on-ones to review career goals and career mapping, a doubling of the learning and development budget, opportunities to hear from speakers with proven expertise, and the ability to lean into modern applications and technologies.

Coconut Software is currently piloting AI technology across departments. "At this point, it's a tool to get answers faster, like a supercharged search engine. Long-term, I see AI as a foundation for developing in a more sophisticated way, and as a crucial tool for staying relevant and attracting top talent," says Regnier.

Since 2021, Coconut Software has more than doubled its revenue. The plan is to double the company again in the next two years. "We welcomed in a lot of new, experienced leadership this past year. I think that's another way to elevate folks and help us on our journey."

NON-PROFIT AND BROADER PUBLIC SECTOR CATEGORY WINNER: FOOD BANKS CANADA/BANQUES ALIMENTAIRES CANADA

Food Banks Canada is working to relieve hunger today and prevent it tomorrow. It delivers on this mission by



Food Banks Canada Staff volunteering at a food packing event, "After the Bell".
IMAGE SUPPLIED BY WATERSTONE HUMAN CAPITAL

supporting more than 5,500 food banks and community organizations across the country, conducting research to identify the root causes of food insecurity and advocating for policy change.

"Just like any business, we have hard goals and we hold ourselves to account against those goals. The work is too important to sacrifice performance," says CEO Kirstin Beardsley. "The only way we can achieve our objectives is with a strong, healthy, engaged team who know they are supported. Taking care of ourselves and each other and helping each other out

is part of the DNA at Food Banks Canada. Purpose, performance and culture are completely intertwined."

This shows up in a number of ways and starts with leadership being human and vulnerable. "We know we are in this together, that it is safe to ask for help and that everyone around you has your back," says Beardsley. "Honesty allows us to have tough conversations when issues arise but also to support each other through them. There are a lot of touchpoints, including town halls and regular one-on-ones between managers

and their teams. I want to hear their suggestions for how we improve, what they are looking forward to, and what their current challenges are."

Regular all-staff meetings provide updates on how the organization is tracking against the strategic plan alongside stories from the field highlighting the impact of their work as well as a kudos corner to celebrate each other. "We also make sure we've got the tools and systems available so folks can succeed in their jobs. We have a pilot cohort of folks who are testing out more advanced AI

technologies and other tools and reporting back to the team on how we could use them to improve efficiency."

Its professional development program is employee-led. Employees identify how and where they want to grow. "We see this as an investment in our future," says Beardsley.

The result: "We set aggressive targets for ourselves in terms of how much funding we support the food bank network with, how much advocacy and research we do, and we continue to meet and exceed the targets we set."

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The Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures™ Awards

recognize best-in-class Canadian organizations that are building and sustaining high-performance cultures which help provide a competitive advantage and drive success.

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Nominations close May 16, 2025.

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CANADA'S MOST ADMIRABLE CEOs:

SHINING A LIGHT ON LEADERS HELPING THEIR TEAMS, ORGANIZATIONS AND CUSTOMERS

MARY TERESA BITTI
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

From world-leading electronics to sustainable, accessible luxury luggage to world-class non-profit healthcare to mental health advocacy to free trade bananas to affordable home care for seniors, this year's cohort of Canada's Most Admired CEO Award winners are an incredibly diverse group.

"The thread that links each of this year's winners is their personal characteristics as leaders: Their ability and willingness to listen not just to their customers but to their people; grounding solutions based on a collaborative, community-based way of operating and focusing their efforts on specific areas where they can make a difference," says Marty Parker, president and CEO of Waterstone Human Capital and founder of the Canada's Most Admired awards program. "This might be the greatest accumulation of leadership capabilities we've ever had. And we need more leaders like them."

ENTERPRISE CATEGORY WINNER: ROB MIONIS, PRESIDENT AND CEO, CELESTICA

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

Our culture is built on four cornerstones. First, we empower our people. For us, this means creating an environment where people feel trusted and supported, that their contributions are valued, and they have the confidence to make decisions and bring forward their best ideas. Second, we ensure our priorities are aligned to our purpose. Through goal deployment, town halls and communications, we ensure everything we do is aligned with our purpose of unlocking the potential of the future with our customers. This shared purpose keeps everyone focused on common goals. Third is accountability. We are disciplined and keep the say-do ratio very high. We expect a lot from ourselves and each other and, in doing so, we earn our customers' trust. Fourth, we embrace a growth mindset, which is essential in the ever-evolving tech industry. By looking ahead and anticipating change, we can make sure we are taking advantage of every opportunity available to continue to grow. **What has been the biggest challenge from a culture and/or performance perspective over the last year?**

The constant pace of change. For example, DeepSeek recently appeared overnight and caused companies around the world to lose billions of market value. The generative AI movement is fairly new but the rate of progress and change is staggering. One of the reasons we've been successful is the strength of our culture, which allows us to adapt quickly and support our customers. **What is your role in building and sustaining culture?**

My job is to make sure our folks are inspired to do their best work, and to really feel proud to be part of Celestica. It's a driver for me every day. People like to work for us because they enjoy the leadership, the camaraderie, the work they do. This past year, we hit all new highs in terms of financial metrics: earnings per share was up 58 per cent year over year. We grew 21 per cent on topline year over year, the highest margins in the company's history and ranked number one or two on 100 per cent of customer scorecards. For the past two years, we were the top-performing stock on the TSX.

MID-MARKET CATEGORY WINNER: VICTOR TAM, CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, MONOS

How do you define a



The 2024 Canada's Most Admired CEOs, clockwise from top left: Rob Mionis, Victor Tam, Mike Kessel, Cathy Thorpe, Michael Anhorn, Jennie Coleman. PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY WATERSTONE HUMAN CAPITAL

high-performance culture at Monos?

It's a culture of work-life flexibility, with a high degree of trust for everyone to be their full authentic selves. Ultimately, work is a big part of our day-to-day lives. People want to wake up and be energized. Having the flexibility to integrate other aspects of your life that bring you joy into your workday is what people love here. This eases everyone to show up each day and have fun and feel motivated. That then leads to the outcomes. We launched in June 2019 and have grown 200 per cent every year over year since.

What is your role in building and sustaining culture?

My role is to continue to care. As we grow, more people join, they may be living in different countries, and it's easy to become disconnected. When you stop caring it can deteriorate and go the other direction pretty quickly. Our company is a hybrid environment. We use Slack for a lot of our communications. People have total and complete access to me. All the decisions we make as leaders are all funnelled down to every single person in the company, so they understand why we made certain decisions and the context of why something didn't work or why it did work. It builds trust and confidence that they can be vulnerable, bring new ideas and share mistakes so we can all improve. That said, just because the culture has been working and got us to this point, it may not get us to the next growth stage. I have to continue to care and ask the questions: Does this still make sense for this part of the onboarding? Or does this piece in how we communicate still work? And change or evolve things as needed.

What advice do you have for leaders – current and future – when it comes to culture?

To build a business that will be of any significant size, you can't do it alone. It's the people. If that is not something that is at the forefront of what you think about day-to-day as a leader, it's going to be difficult to achieve what you want.

GROWTH CATEGORY WINNER: MIKE KESSEL, CEO AND PRESIDENT, CLEVELAND CLINIC CANADA

How do you define a high-performance culture at Cleveland Clinic Canada?

To me, it is a team that is aligned around mission, vision, values and goals that looks to overachieve in all

these areas. When I think about our own high-performance culture, three things come to mind: The first is the importance of diversity — bringing together individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives, fostering a culture of constructive dialogue to enhance patient care. Second, we are a patient-first organization. The more people who embrace this culture, the higher our performance. Third, we have an annual planning process here that is measurable, transparent and aligns with the global enterprise-wide planning process. Cleveland Clinic is a global nonprofit foundation that started in 1921 and served 15 million patient encounters in 2024. We all have to be aligned.

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

The most valuable advice I've received in this area is to set clear expectations and be hard on the issues and soft on the people. When someone needs coaching, you're there. When someone needs help planning their objectives and key results, you're there to support them. It's also essential that our work is measurable. For example, quality and safety is a top priority in healthcare. We aim to eliminate serious safety events, striving for a goal of zero. Achieving this requires coaching our caregivers, ensuring they have the necessary resources, and maintaining a strong commitment to accountability.

What advice do you have for leaders – current and future – when it comes to culture?

Be authentic. How you carry yourself at home and at work should be similar. Being real will help attract the best people and the brightest minds and keep them there for a long time. Care about each person at the organization. Set aside time to meet with everyone. We have over 400 caregivers in the Canadian organization and 83,000 globally. Everyone is unique. Personalize your interactions with them. Also, continue to add to your own skill set. Last year I studied Mandarin.

EMERGING CATEGORY WINNER: JENNIE COLEMAN, PRESIDENT, EQUIFRUIT

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

I think our high-performance culture is driven by not emphasizing high performance. We are going to evolve as the business grows, but we are very mission-focused as a

team. The language we use in what are called performance reviews elsewhere are contribution reviews here. Equifruit is an importer and marketer of fair-trade bananas. We are on a mission to transform the North American banana industry by convincing retail buyers to source bananas responsibly. Our vision is global fair-trade banana domination. Bananas are the cheapest fruit in our baskets but only because of poverty wages, poor working conditions and living the effects of environmental shortcuts, which have been taken to increase yields. Switching to a fair-trade banana is going to cost you about \$10 more per year. Right now only four per cent of the global market is bought and sold on fair-trade terms. We can't accept this. That's what drives us. Without a lot of carrots and with very few sticks, we end up being a team that works hard, has fun together and keeps our focus on our mission.

How do you leverage a people-first focus to drive productivity, innovation and accountability?

A byproduct of this culture and focus on contribution is that people feel safe at work. We lost a big contract in December. During our post-mortem meeting, everyone around the table discussed what went wrong, what they could have done to mitigate this and what we can do to ensure we prevent this from happening again. There was no finger-pointing. We are all going to make mistakes; when we do, the important thing is to admit them, think about how we won't make them again and then move on.

What advice do you have for leaders – current and future – when it comes to culture?

Younger people are searching for meaning in the work they do. It's up to leaders to always connect work to meaning. We have all the proper HR systems, competitive salaries and bonus structures to compete for talent but the tipping point for choosing to work with us is definitely feeling like you are contributing to the impact we are making for small growers and plantation workers. Our accounts payable clerk could be processing invoices for any other company anywhere, but she is so into what we're doing she shares whatever I've posted on LinkedIn. She is an ambassador for Equifruit.

NON-PROFIT AND BROADER PUBLIC SECTOR CATEGORY WINNER: MICHAEL ANHORN, CEO,

CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION (CMHA), TORONTO BRANCH

How do you define a high-performance culture at CMHA, Toronto Branch?

At CMHA Toronto we don't talk about a high-performance culture. We talk about having a culture that places clients (people we work with who are living with severe mental health challenges) first in our considerations, and that values high levels of both empathy and accountability. Accountability is to our clients, to provide the highest-quality services, and to our teams, the organization and our funders to meet clear goals that are aligned with our strategic plan and funding obligations.

What is your role in culture?

My role is to build the environment within which positive client and staff experiences occur, and that advances our goals. I work with our board and senior team to articulate our vision, where we are going and what we want to achieve. I support our senior team to support their teams to further define the goals, track progress and celebrate as we meet important milestones and, ultimately, the goals. If we're not meeting some of our goals, I support the organization to assess if the goals remain the goals we need to meet and, if needed, revise plans to achieve them.

What has been the biggest challenge from a culture and/or performance perspective and how have you overcome it?

We've had two cultural challenges to overcome. The first was helping the organization move from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset. Scarcity mindsets, common in the not-for-profit sector, are expressed in sayings and thoughts like "we have no money, and so we can't do X." An abundance mindset allows staff to look for ways to accomplish what we need to accomplish not restricted by current resources.

Over the last few years, another of our challenges has been to maintain the high level of empathy in our culture and to build the level of accountability up to an equally high level. I think that in the past, parts of the organization saw empathy and accountability either as opposite or as incompatible. The work we've done over the last couple of years has been to demonstrate that empathy and accountability are different and complementary processes and that the most effective teams develop in

environments with high empathy and high accountability.

MACKAY CEO FORUMS SOCIAL PURPOSE INNOVATOR CATEGORY WINNER: CATHY THORPE, PRESIDENT AND CEO, NURSE NEXT DOOR

What role has purpose played in building a high-performance team at Nurse Next Door?

Purpose is the foundation of high performance. When you are passionate about the purpose, you are excited about what you're doing, and that will drive results. We are all about making lives better. We call it happier aging. We go into clients' homes and find out what they used to love doing, and we bring that into the experience of what they are doing today. When you can bring that happiness and joy into someone's life, it's incredibly rewarding and it connects everyone with the purpose. It also helps attract the right people.

How do you define a high-performance culture at Nurse Next Door?

Continuous improvement. It's this concept of, you are never there. If you have that mindset, you're always coming into work and looking for opportunities to do things differently. When you have that, you have innovation. Innovation happens because people are taking chances, and they are taking chances because they know they have the space and trust to do that. That's when amazing things happen. High performance here is also about being self-led. We got rid of the role of manager years ago. When you are self-led, you don't need to be told what to do and you are given the space and autonomy to thrive. That also builds accountability into the equation. When you can create a culture of self-led leaders, it's amazing what people can get done. I've been with the company for 11 years. We had 40 franchises when I started. Today we have more than 400 franchise locations across Canada, the U.S., Australia and England. Our system wide sales grew 25 per cent last year. When we plan, we say "What's possible?"

What is your role in culture?

It all has to start with me. If I'm not looking at myself and asking "How can I do things better? How am I growing? How am I being a learner?"; I can't ask that of anyone else. In terms of the operations, I have an incredible team. I'm not here to tell them what to do; I'm here to continuously improve and make sure this culture is thriving.

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CANADA'S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURE HONOUREES FOR 2024



Culture celebration: Top photo, Marty Parker, Waterstone president/CEO, addresses 2023 gala for Canada's Most Admired Awards honourees; photo above, the Interac Corp. team with their 2023 award. PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY WATERSTONE HUMAN CAPITAL

CANADA'S MOST ADMIRABLE CEOs OF 2024

Enterprise Rob Mionis, president and CEO, Celestica (Toronto)
Mid-Market Victor Tam, CEO and co-founder, Monos (Vancouver)
Growth Mike Kessel, CEO and president, Cleveland Clinic Canada (Toronto)
Emerging Jennie Coleman, president, Equifruit (Montreal)
Non-Profit and Broader Public Sector Michael Anhorn, CEO, Canadian Mental Health Association, Toronto Branch (Toronto)
Mackay CEO Forums Social Purpose Innovator Cathy Thorpe, president and CEO, Nurse Next Door (Vancouver)

Bimbo Canada (Etobicoke, Ont.)
 BMO (Toronto)
 Compass Group Canada (Mississauga, Ont.)
 goeasy Ltd. (Mississauga, Ont.)
 Longo's (Vaughan, Ont.)
 Manulife (Toronto)
 Mattamy Homes (Toronto)
 Nestlé Canada Inc. (North York, Ont.)
 Nissan Canada Inc. (Mississauga, Ont.)
 PointClickCare Technologies (Toronto)
 Questrade Financial Group (Toronto)
 RioCan REIT (Toronto)

Hotspx Media Inc. (Toronto)
 Innoflo Solutions Inc. (Edmonton)
 Lorne Park Capital Partners Inc. (Oakville, Ont.)
 Security Compass (Toronto)
 Sharethrough Inc. (Montreal)
 StarFish Medical (Victoria, B.C.)
 The Travel Corporation (Toronto)
 Thinkific (Vancouver)

CANADA'S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURES OF 2024 - EMERGING

BenchSci (Toronto)
 Charitable Impact (Vancouver)
 Coconut Software (Saskatoon)
 Insurance Insight Inc. (Oakville, Ont.)
 Jan Kelley (Burlington, Ont.)
 Miller Titerle + Co. (Vancouver)
 Righteous Gelato (Calgary)
 Showpass (Calgary)
 TLC Solutions (Vancouver)
 Treefrog Inc. (Newmarket, Ont.)

CANADA'S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURES OF 2024 - NON-PROFIT AND BROADER PUBLIC SECTOR

Canadian Mental Health Association, Toronto Branch (Toronto)
 Civida (Edmonton)
 Covenant Health (Edmonton)
 Cystic Fibrosis Canada (Toronto)
 Food Banks Canada /Banques alimentaires Canada (Mississauga, Ont.)
 Goodwill Industries of Alberta (Edmonton)
 Halton Healthcare (Oakville, Ont.)
 SE Health (Markham, Ont.)
 The Ottawa Hospital (Ottawa)
 ventureLAB (Markham, Ont.)

CANADA'S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURES OF 2024 - MID-MARKET

Acuitas Therapeutics Inc. (Vancouver)
 Book Depot (Thorold, Ont.)
 Flipp Operations (Etobicoke, Ont.)
 The Great Little Box Company Ltd. (Richmond, B.C.)
 KUBRA (Mississauga, Ont.)
 MCAN Financial Group (Toronto)
 QSL International (Québec City)
 Securiguard Services Limited (Vancouver)
 Superior Glove Works (Acton, Ont.)
 Trico Homes (Calgary)

CANADA'S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURES OF 2024 - GROWTH

4Seasons Transportation (Calgary)
 Accent Inns Inc. (Victoria, B.C.)
 Copperleaf, an IFS Company (Vancouver)
 Cowan Insurance Group (Cambridge, Ont.)
 Fresh Tracks Canada (Vancouver)

CANADA'S MOST ADMIRABLE CPCOs OF 2024

Enterprise Rashid Wasti, executive vice-president and chief talent officer, Weston Group of Companies (Toronto)
Mid-Market Tracy Young-McLean, vice-president/CHRO, Rise Air (Saskatoon)
Growth Agata Zasada, chief people experience officer, Paystone (Vancouver)
Emerging Cerys Cook, chief people officer, Swift Medical Inc. (Toronto)
Non-Profit and Broader Public Sector Michele James, executive vice-president, people and transformation, Scarborough Health Network (Toronto)

CANADA'S MOST ADMIRABLE CORPORATE CULTURES OF 2024 - ENTERPRISE

Bayer Canada (Mississauga, Ont.)

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YOU'VE WORKED HARD
to build a corporate culture that helps you stand out from the crowd. We think that deserves to be celebrated!

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recognize best-in-class Canadian organizations that are building and sustaining high-performance cultures which help provide a competitive advantage and drive success.

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Nominations close May 16, 2025.

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CANADA'S MOST ADMIRED CPCOs: PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST, DRIVING ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

MARY TERESA BITTI
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

Year two of Waterstone Human Capital's Canada's Most Admired Chief People and Culture Officers (CPCO) awards program solidifies a growing trend among Canada's leading companies: "CPCOs are a critical part of every business conversation and decision that is happening," says Lyn Currie, Waterstone Human Capital's managing director, executive search.

"This trend really took hold during COVID, but with the economic uncertainty stemming from inflation and now, as Canada navigates an evolving relationship with our largest trading partner, culture matters more than ever before," says Currie. "Organizations are focused on retaining, developing and caring for their people to drive performance and growth."

This year's honorees are working closely with their CEOs to craft and lead these people-focused initiatives. Specifically, they are creating the processes, frameworks, learning opportunities and KPIs to encourage open, candid dialogue, active listening, transparency and connection to organizational purpose and business objectives.

"At a time when diversity, equity and inclusion are under assault in the U.S., each of this year's winners is creating inclusive environments that ensure every voice is heard and individuals, teams and organizations can thrive in all economic environments," says Currie.

Here are the 2024 Waterstone Human Capital Canada's Most Admired Chief People and Culture Officer Award winners.

* Responses have been edited for clarity and space.

ENTERPRISE CATEGORY WINNER: RASHID WASTI, EXECUTIVE VICE-PRESIDENT AND CHIEF TALENT OFFICER, WESTON GROUP OF COMPANIES

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

It's a combination of three things — and it has to be all three. People need to have meaningful work that they find joy and purpose in. At the same time, it has to be in a great environment that they enjoy being a part of. And third, there need to be appropriate rewards when they do this work.

We are a very large company that touches almost all Canadians almost every day in areas of their lives that matter: food, nutrition, health, beauty, children. We create meaning by emphasizing an understanding of the work we do every day and how it affects the lives of tens of millions of fellow Canadians.

We've spent the last decade building an environment where people can be authentic, where positive behaviours are pervasive, and where people are recognized for good work. We work hard at understanding what someone individually aspires to and which areas they are interested in and, conversely, where the needs of business are and trying to match those to people and move people relatively early in their careers so they can get those rich experiences and decide the path they want to pursue.

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

A people-oriented organization is not at odds with having an environment where people feel accountability for what they do. In fact, the former is an essential ingredient of fostering the latter. Our culture prioritizes behaviours that allow people to be the best they can be and bring out the best in each other through listening, curiosity, the willingness

to express what they truly think, to have constructive debate and take responsibility for things each of us can make better. And having felt heard, and a part of the decisions, naturally leads to a sense of personal accountability for subsequent outcomes. Similarly, we invest thoughtfully into other aspects of the organization — learning and development, career movement, flexibility, rewards, the physical work environment — because far from being just "costs", these are critical enablers for strong, motivated people to perform at their best.

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

At a personal level, I find success in the impact of helping people grow and achieve and accomplish the most they can. At a company level, success in this role is creating the conditions where our people can do extraordinary things so that people and culture become an advantage. Have we managed to attract, retain and develop the best people? Equally important, do we have the right people in the right roles? Do these people work well together?

MID-MARKET CATEGORY WINNER: TRACY YOUNG-MCLEAN, VICE-PRESIDENT/CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCES OFFICER, RISE AIR (RETIRED IN DECEMBER, 2024)

What was your role in culture?

When I started, Rise Air was two different companies: West Wind Aviation had acquired Transwest Air, but they were operating independently. My job was to bring the brands together and create a unique culture that would foster the economic growth of the seven Indigenous communities that own Rise Air and preserve their cultural values.

We brought people together and asked, 'what do you want your company to look like? What do you want it to be called? This is your company. You have a say, let's hear it.' My role was to empower the employees to embrace the change and to create something they would be proud of. In March 2022, we unveiled the new name, which came from a senior pilot, and logo, which is based on a sketch submitted from a junior pilot, and built the brand around that.

How did you help the company attract and retain exceptional talent?

In addition to bringing two competing organizational cultures together, there was no human resources department. We had to build structures and programs. Two of my senior advisers were both new Canadians, and had never had a job in Canada before. They brought a completely different perspective to everything, and we built these programs around the people instead of the other way around. It was a huge opportunity.

Last year, we built an external pilot program for Athabasca Basin residents and an internal program to provide funding for employees pursuing their commercial pilots license. The excitement they're generating helps push us as an employer of choice. We implemented an inclusivity, diversity, equity and accessibility plan strategy along with our commitment to the Indigenization of our organization. People from all over the world work here. As a diverse group we are better.

How did you leverage a people-first focus with accountability?

You have to develop a trust mindset. You do that by making sure leadership across functions are involved in everything because they know best what their own goals are in relation to the strategic plan. We push open



The 2024 Canada's Most Admired CPCOs, clockwise from top left: Cerys Cook, Michele James, Tracy Young-McLean, Rashid Wasti, Agata Zasada. PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY WATERSTONE HUMAN CAPITAL

communication and transparency, continuous feedback, and we use tools like town halls, pulse surveys and one-on-ones. That helps foster a sense of belonging and safety, which drives accountability.

GROWTH CATEGORY WINNER: AGATA ZASADA, FORMER CHIEF PEOPLE EXPERIENCE OFFICER, PAYSTONE; CURRENTLY SENIOR VICE-PRESIDENT, PEOPLE AND CULTURE, ZAYZOOM

What is your role in culture?

Building a high-performance culture is my primary role. To do that, every part of the employee experience has to be aligned with business success. I see human resources, operations and finance as the foundational layers in business. When a workplace culture is strong and employees feel valued, supported and empowered, then that drives engagement, productivity and innovation in the workplace. That's not just the HR function. The three layers have to work together.

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

I believe employees want to do good work, they want to have an impact and they want to be recognized, rewarded and grow. You hit all those facets by empowering and supporting employees with the right tools, resources, opportunities and structures to help them take control of their work.

A strategic HR team will proactively find resources and opportunities in concert with business partners throughout the organization. To supercharge that, put your employees in charge of their own growth and have their managers and the HR team support and be the guard rails — not the brakes — by aligning personal development with driving business results. People know what they are missing in their development, the experience, skills and competency they need. When you give people the tools and support to do their jobs, they are going to do it and they are going to want to do it. Being people-first drives accountability.

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

Performance and happiness of the organization. The performance of the organiz-

ation is about achievement of top level, department level and team level goals. When teams don't feel like they're winning or they are disjointed from the rest of the organization's success, morale suffers.

Employee engagement surveys are a good health check for happiness, but they represent a point in time. I also look at how many employees contribute to peer feedback, how many employees actively focus on personal growth through their experience, skills and attainment of competency development. When people are actively trying to grow and aligning themselves to the organization, you know they are engaged. The goal is to have performance and happiness mirror each other. You can't have one higher than the other.

EMERGING CATEGORY WINNER: CERYS COOK, CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, SWIFT MEDICAL INC.

What is your role in culture?

My role in shaping culture is both as a steward and an architect, working alongside the CEO. I am committed to preserving the essence of our culture, ensuring it reflects and reinforces who we are. My team designs programs that enhance and align with our core values and desired behaviours. Values like Disrupt to the Impossible and Amplify Positive Impact are intentionally embedded in everything we do, from strategy and leadership development to daily interactions. They act as a cultural compass.

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

We've built an employer brand by focusing on our mission: "Healing our world faster". When you have a strong mission, it's easier to attract people who already have a connection to it. We have really big goals and, like many startups, we're building the plane as we are flying it. So we need people who are excited to figure out what the answers are.

Understanding the persona of the people we need helps us to attract and retain talent who are excited to take on impactful projects, continuously learn and stretch within their roles. We believe strong leaders are the foundation of high retention. We have a program called Leading Out Loud, which empowers our leaders to in-



spire, support and elevate their teams. When leaders are equipped to foster that sense of trust, psychological safety and growth, people are much more engaged, fulfilled and likely to stay.

What role does inclusion play in your culture?

Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) is fundamental to our mission and how we operate internally and externally. It is embedded in every stage of the talent lifecycle, from implementing unbiased hiring practices to transparent compensation models to DEIB training, to making sure every voice is heard.

It's a core driver of our innovation and it's the way we design our products. We have a wound care software application effective across all skin tones, which is a critical consideration to ensure positive health-care outcomes. It is a differentiator for us. We need to have a team that is diverse so that we approach our challenges from every angle, and make better decisions and create better products as a result.

NON-PROFIT AND BROADER PUBLIC SECTOR CATEGORY WINNER: MICHELE JAMES, EXECUTIVE VICE-PRESIDENT, PEOPLE AND TRANSFORMATION, SCARBOROUGH HEALTH NETWORK

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

We have a strategic plan that has people and culture as one of five strategic directions. We have a corporate scorecard and strategic initiatives we are accountable for that are related to people and business. We know that diverse and inclusive workplaces are more productive. We know that incivility reduces productivity. Creating a healthy workplace is good, no matter how you look at it. We have to give people the tools and the training to do

their best — and they will. **How have you helped your organization attract and retain exceptional talent?**

A couple of years ago, we adopted a formal recruitment brand: Where the world comes to work. It really speaks to what we are about. We are proud of our rich diversity and we want to create a sense of belonging for everyone. We have education focused on inclusion and belonging, we have multiple communities of inclusion led by staff. We are developing a new peer support recognition program. We've invested in a program from the Mental Health Commission of Canada called The Working Mind that offers training on how to recognize issues of mental health, prevent it and what to do about it. Five hundred people have already gone through the program and, because we want to spread it, we've now trained our own internal facilitators to deliver the program.

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

I'm big on retention. Our voluntary turnover was 7.3 per cent for this fiscal year. Our target was 9.6 per cent based on our hospital peer group benchmark. Our most recent employee engagement survey showed we scored highest on support for diversity, collaboration, freedom from discrimination and satisfaction with one's manager. This gives a sense we are on the right track. We also look at good labour relations with our unions, participation in our education offerings, from The Working Mind program to anti-Black racism training to pathway programs to a range of leadership programs. We are a heavily unionized environment. Nurses have a central collective agreement. It's challenging to compete on that level, so we don't. We make a difference by creating a workplace that values you and where you will be listened to, recognized and supported.



“OUR NO. 1 FOCUS IS ON OUR STUDENTS AND ON OUR PEOPLE. OUR BUS TEAMS ARE THE CORE OF OUR COMPANY AND, WITHOUT THEM, WE COULDN'T PROVIDE INDUSTRY-LEADING SERVICE TO OUR STUDENTS. TO SET OURSELVES APART, WE HAVE BUILT A CULTURE AROUND SUPPORTING OUR EMPLOYEES SO THAT THEY, IN TURN, CAN GIVE THE SAME QUALITY CARE THEY'RE PROVIDED WITH TO OUR STUDENTS. — BROOKE GARCIA, 4SEASONS CEO

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DRIVING IMPACT BY PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

4SEASONS TRANSPORTATION

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How do you attract and retain talent in an industry facing worker shortages, high turnover, and demanding job conditions? For 4Seasons Transportation (4Seasons), a growing Calgary-based school bus company that provides barrier-free transportation to students living with disabilities, the answer is to focus on supporting your people first.

“At 4Seasons Transportation, our No. 1 focus is on our students and on our people. Our bus teams are the core of our company and, without them, we couldn't provide industry-leading service to our students,” says 4Seasons Transportation's chief executive officer, Brooke Garcia. “To set ourselves apart, we have built a culture around supporting our employees so that they, in turn, can give the same quality care they're provided with to our students.”

4Seasons Transportation, a 2024 Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures winner, has a clear mission to positively impact the lives of students living with disabilities and their families by making sure they have equal access to education and start their day ready to learn. It's a responsibility and shared purpose everyone at 4Seasons takes seriously, and it is embodied in the company's core values of safety, compassion, leadership and adaptability. Its buses transport students with a broad range of motor and cognitive challenges, which require adaptive strategies to ensure every student's needs are tended to. The term “school bus driver” does not describe the skills or compassion needed for the role, which is why 4Seasons renamed the term school bus driver to transfer care specialist.

This deep sense of purpose and responsibility to provide support and quality care has been part of the organization's DNA since day one. “I started with 4Seasons Transportation when there were only eight employees in the company. Created from a need to provide transportation for students that would otherwise face constant barriers getting to school, care and compassion have always been my top priority — and that has always been our focus,” says Garcia.

Since becoming CEO in 2018, Garcia, who joined the company as a driver in 2010, has worked to ensure



the company is intentional about its culture. This, in turn, has led to significant growth and an even deeper commitment to putting people — and organizational culture — first. That focus accelerated when the company landed its first big contract with a school board, putting 4Seasons Transportation on the path to rapid growth, expanding to more than 80 employees. Today, the company has grown to 600 employees, reinforcing the cycle of mission, culture, performance, growth and the ability to positively impact the lives of more students.

“I didn't fit the usual mold of a ‘perfect’ employee, so I set out to create an environment I would want to work in and come to every day. We built this company on culture and purpose-driven leadership,” says Garcia. “It all starts with hiring the right people — those who are caring and compassionate. We can teach anyone to drive a school bus, but you can't teach compassion. Hiring for soft skills comes first, and we train the technical skills later.”

One of the biggest challenges in transportation is employee retention. By putting people first, hiring individuals who share its values, and ensuring employees feel supported, appreciated and well-trained, 4Seasons Transportation has been able to maintain a 90 per cent retention rate, compared to the industry average of 70 per cent. When employees do leave, they often provide referrals for 4Seasons as an employer of choice to friends and family.

Recognizing that their employees spend most of their time in the field, rarely meeting their co-workers or supervisors, 4Seasons pri-

oritizes connection by hosting weekly events that bring everyone together, fostering a sense of belonging and creating a support system to remind teams that they're never alone in the work they do. This includes regularly reinforcing and celebrating the critical role each employee plays in fulfilling the company's mission.

Transfer care specialists are not just supported through community building. As they are trusted with the responsibility of getting students to school safely, employees are provided with access to industry-leading training programs which cover topics such as safe driving and how to manage challenging behaviours. 4Seasons encourages its people to constantly evolve their skills and provides them with refresh training, in-field mentorship and workshops throughout the year, so their employees' growth is never stagnant.

“Everyone is equal at 4Seasons and we make sure that every level of the company is equipped with the tools and resources needed to contribute effectively,” says Garcia. “Clear communication is a cornerstone of our culture, and it drives both accountability and productivity. We understand that no one is separate from what truly matters because every team member is a unique touch point in the larger web we create together, ensuring that everyone is aligned and working towards our shared goals.”

4Seasons, whose staff is 75 per cent female and come from diverse backgrounds — it's common to find colleagues chatting in Spanish, Tagalog, Punjabi and many other languages — understands the power of inclu-

sion, and ensuring everyone, regardless of background or circumstance, has the same chance to grow and succeed within the organization. The result? Like Garcia, 95 per cent of its management and administrative team started as transfer care specialists. “We are committed to providing career opportunities to people who may not have had access to traditional education or conventional employment pathways,” says Garcia. “Our workforce is diverse, and we have a strong emphasis on creating opportunities for immigrants, individuals with disabilities, and women. Our best employees think outside the box and contribute to our evolution.”

Together, the high-performance team at 4Seasons is able to adapt to the complex needs of students with creative and compassionate solutions that ensure students arrive at school calm, safe, and ready to learn. “We expect our students to be provided with people-first strategies, so we provide our employees with the same. School bus driving can have long hours and difficult days, but our people still show up and put in the work because our students matter to them. That's what high-performance means at 4Seasons, and it's fuelled by our purpose. When we have challenging days, our purpose is what gets us up in the morning — because our students are waiting at their doors, excited to go to school.”

This keen sense of purpose is also driving the company's growth, which is all about making the biggest impact possible. At 4Seasons, this means reaching as many students as it can by expanding in Calgary and beyond. To realize this goal,



Top photo: 4Seasons team members. Photo above: A transfer care specialist leading a training workshop. 4SEASONS TRANSPORTATION IMAGES

4Seasons continues to prioritize and invest in its innovative, safety-focused training program to deliver the best care and service possible. It is also developing a dispatch and student tracking app, which will leverage technology to streamline operations, improve communication, and optimize efficiency.

Where does 4Seasons Transportation go from here? “Our vision for the future is to continue innovating both the transportation and disability industries, making an impact and supporting as many students as we can. We aim to expand beyond Calgary and across Canada, not only to reach more students but also to support more employees by

creating opportunities for them — especially newcomers to Canada, individuals with disabilities, and those from underrepresented communities who face barriers to employment,” says Garcia.

“As we grow, it's essential to maintain the same culture that has made us so successful. We've made significant progress from our humble beginnings, and each year we strive to improve our communication with employees, maintain operational efficiency, and exceed safety standards to ensure a high level of performance. Above all, we want to strengthen our corporate culture by keeping people at the core of everything we do.”

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“OUR PEOPLE ARE AT THE HEART OF EVERYTHING WE DO. OUR APPROACH FOSTERS A CULTURE OF SAFETY, WELL-BEING AND INCLUSIVITY, SUPPORTING RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION THROUGH CULTURAL ALIGNMENT, AND ENCOURAGING LONG-TERM CAREER GROWTH. – LESLEE WILLS, VICE-PRESIDENT, PEOPLE & CORPORATE AFFAIRS, BIMBO CANADA

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WHERE ‘PEOPLE-FIRST’ IS MORE THAN A SLOGAN

BIMBO CANADA

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Bimbo Canada is proud of its “people-first” culture. Guided by “The Bimbo Way,” the foundation of its culture, the company’s core beliefs emphasize integrity, efficiency and accountability, while delivering results.

“Our people are at the heart of everything we do,” says Leslee Wills, vice-president, people & corporate affairs. “Our approach fosters a culture of safety, well-being and inclusivity, supporting recruitment and retention through cultural alignment, and encouraging long-term career growth.”

Bimbo Canada is the country’s oldest and largest bakery, nourishing Canadians with high-quality baked goods and snacks for more than 113 years. As part of Grupo Bimbo, the world’s largest baking company, Bimbo Canada operates 15 bakeries and 183 sales centres nationwide, with recognizable brands such as Dempster’s, Villaggio, POM, Vachon and Takis.

This year Bimbo Canada was named one of Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Cultures by Waterstone Human Capital, in recognition of the company’s winning culture.

Wills highlights that at Bimbo Canada, the 4,000 people who work for the company are referred to as “associates,” not as “employees.” A great differentiator, she explains, is in how Bimbo Canada sees each associate as a human being and not as a tool or a resource. “Our company exists for people, not the other way around, and the development of our people is the goal.”

In amplifying that statement, Wills says that “each associate brings a unique authenticity to work, knowing that they are cared for, respected and valued, so that they can grow and reach their maximum human potential,” noting that her title is vice-president, people & corporate affairs, specifically “people” rather than “human resources.”

At the heart of the company’s culture, states Wills, is an insistence on cultivating a work environment where associates feel respected, valued and empowered to grow. “Through open communications and a focus on inclusivity, we prioritize the health and happiness of our associates, ensuring they reach their full potential.”

Certainly, she says, this insistence on the value of the person benefits each associ-



Bimbo Canada’s people-first culture, guided by The Bimbo Way, has earned recognition as one of Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Cultures. This reflects the company’s foundation of integrity, efficiency and accountability while delivering results and supporting its 4,000 associates. BIMBO CANADA IMAGE

ate and, in turn, it also benefits the company, adding that this people-first philosophy and culture exists throughout the entire Grupo Bimbo organization. As illustration, she points to the words of the company’s global chief people officer, Juan Muldoon: “If people grow, the business grows, and that’s where the magic happens.”

A foundational tenet of The Bimbo Way is to always be transparent and honest, whether with its associates, suppliers, customers or the community-at-large. “It’s important that although people may not always like what they hear, they know that it will be transparent and honest, and that’s part of our unique culture.”

As an internal example, Wills cites the company’s annual associate engagement survey. “The primary measure of how we’re doing in building a sustainable, highly productive and deeply humane organization is our annual SayIt! associate engagement survey.” In 2024, she says with pride, the company recorded an astounding and record-high response rate to the survey of 89 per cent, up from its 2023 highest-ever rate of 81 per cent.

“We listen to our associates, take action on their feedback and, this is really important, share throughout the Bimbo Canada community the actions taken in response to their feedback,” says Wills. This is not a token exercise, as Wills and the executive team read every single line of the 6,000-plus lines of commentary, in English and French, of the associates’ responses to the survey. Further, “the company’s people analytics platform helps us track retention and turnover, ensuring we maintain a strong, vibrant culture,” adds Wills.

Leadership development is key to Bimbo Canada’s success. Four years ago, Bimbo Canada developed a leadership competency model to ensure consistent expectations for its leaders; the model needed to be purpose-driven and reflect the company’s corporate philosophy, while supporting its business strategy.

Wills points out that, in staying true to the company’s beliefs, focus groups representing associates at all levels participated in helping to define the model, providing input into what it takes to be a leader and what at-

tributes and behaviours are needed to fully realize the company’s people-first culture.

The success of the team-based approach is clear: the leadership personalized one-on-one coaching program has helped senior leaders grow their skills, with a 79.5 per cent improvement in leadership effectiveness. “We are particularly proud that the leadership competency model — developed right here by Bimbo Canada, the third-largest country business unit in Grupo Bimbo — has been adopted and adapted globally throughout the organization.”

Helping associates, whatever their position in the organization, to reach their potential is a commitment the company makes to them, says Wills. In 2024, the company recorded an average of 54 hours of training per associate: “There is something for everyone!”

Since 2021, Bimbo Canada has worked to foster a more inclusive workplace through initiatives such as its DEIB committee and a \$1 million investment in a five-year strategy. It has made significant strides in supplier diversity and Indigenous rec-

onciliation, aiming to create an inclusive and sustainable environment for all.

When it comes to sustainability, Bimbo Canada has completed more than 100 projects, reduced emissions and increased energy efficiency across its facilities. The company is an industry leader in sustainability.

“As the first bakery company in North America to switch bread-bag closure clips to 100 per cent recycled cardboard and, having the most Energy-Star certified facilities in any industry, we’re proud of our ongoing efforts to reduce waste and transition to renewable energy,” says Wills.

In addition, Bimbo Canada’s people-first culture is reflected in its “Bimbo Give Good” volunteer programs. Through this mix of organization-led and associate-led efforts, the company’s associates participate in local communities’ initiatives, lending a hand to social programs such as food security, mental well-being and reconciliation.

Wills is passionate about Bimbo Canada’s people-first culture, saying that “nurturing a people-first

culture means that literally everything we do IS our culture; it’s the way Bimbo Canada works rather than a task that sits on a list of things to do. We don’t just check boxes, we lean in, take action and mean business. I can’t emphasize enough that the company exists for its people, not the other way around.”

When other businesses, customers and consumers come into contact with Bimbo Canada, she says, they recognize a distinct way of doing things. It starts, Wills reiterates, first and foremost in “our belief in the special dignity and value of the human person; we believe that as a people we form one community.”

“We believe that this community is focused on getting results,” she continues. “We do this by competing and winning in the market with superior quality and efficiency in everything we do, by being very, very good at what we do, which is what we refer to as the belief of being a sharp operator. And, by always acting with integrity so that as a company we can transcend and endure for a very long time. That’s the Bimbo Way.”

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“CULTURE IS NOT SOMETHING YOU JUST TALK ABOUT; YOU HAVE TO ACTIVELY CULTIVATE IT AND LIVE IT EVERY SINGLE DAY. A STRONG CULTURE ALLOWS COMPANIES TO BE AGILE AND ADAPT IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT.

— ROB MIONIS, CEO, CELESTICA

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FOR CELESTICA CEO, CULTURE IS THE BEDROCK TO SUCCESS

CELESTICA CEO ROB MIONIS

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It has been 10 years since Rob Mionis assumed the role of president and CEO at Celestica. Since then, he has steered the company from a contract manufacturer to a thriving, multi-faceted technology innovation company delivering complex solutions to a global market.

Celestica spun out of IBM Canada's manufacturing operations in 1994, becoming a stand-alone company in 1996. The company grew organically and through acquisitions. Today, it has 27,000 employees and operates 43 facilities in 17 countries. Canada is home to its global headquarters, as well as manufacturing facilities in Mississauga and Newmarket, Ont.

When Mionis — a 2024 Canada's Most Admired CEOs category honouree — joined Celestica in 2015, the company was at a crossroads with limited growth opportunities. He recognized a cultural shift was necessary to evolve the business moving forward. “We needed a culture that would drive our ability to adapt across regions. It was a tough challenge, but it has made us a much stronger company.”

Culture is the bedrock of any successful organization, he adds. “It's not something you just talk about; you have to actively cultivate and live it every single day. A strong culture allows companies to be agile and adapt in a rapidly changing business environment.”

An electrical engineer by training, Mionis developed a deep respect for precision, teamwork and attention to detail early in his career. He also learned that operational excellence relied heavily on strong collaboration and a sense of a common goal. “You have to bring your best to your role every day and trust one another to stay at the top of your game.”

Each vocation he pursued offered different perspectives and challenges, he adds. “Regions and industries have different cultural twists to them. When I think about all the people I have worked with and the advice received by managers and mentors, it shaped me into who I am as a person and the principles I value as a leader.”

There was one encounter during his early career with GE CEO Jack Welch that showed him another important aspect of leadership.

“When he visited our site, I was nervous. But he im-



mediately put me at ease when he asked me about myself. He was prepared, had pre-read the report and wanted to talk about some of the details and hear my perspective. I walked away saying ‘that is a leader I really admire.’ His style, his ability to put people at ease and connect with them, his general curiosity — that taught me a lot early in my career.”

During his years at Honeywell, Mionis often travelled with one of the leaders on business reviews. Those meetings reinforced the importance of active listening. “He always went around the table and asked each person to comment on what they heard, appreciated the areas of improvement, and made sure every leader reviewed the responses. Understanding and valuing the contribution of every member of the team is a practice I have carried forward to today.”

A culture is also something that is in a constant state of flux, Mionis believes. “We never rest on our laurels. We actively seek feedback through employee surveys and other channels to understand what's working and where we can improve. Maintaining a strong culture requires ongoing effort, especially as new employees join and as others retire. We want to make sure we don't lose the recipe of what makes the company great while continuously adapting and growing.”

Open communications have been a critical component in Celestica's growth and success. Not only do leaders convene regularly to share

their perspectives, employees have become an integral part of that process through storytelling, town halls (local and global), employee surveys, and Q&A sessions.

“Storytelling is a good way to build culture,” says Mionis. “In my rookie year at Celestica I really wanted to learn about the business, the culture and the people. As soon as I joined, I walked to the cafeteria and sat down to speak to a long-term employee, and we started chatting over fries. He talked about the sense of community and the trust he had in his leadership, his friends and colleagues. Sitting down and talking to folks to hear their perspectives provides valuable information and shapes how we lead.”

Engaging the front lines is central to his approach. “They are the ones who see things first-hand. If I want to understand what is happening with a customer, I want to hear from the customer lead or engineer who deals with them.”

Active listening and open communications are only part of the culture equation, he believes. Execution is another important pillar. Mionis abides by a 51-49 philosophy, where 51 per cent of decision-making is fact-based, and 49 per cent is intuition or gut feeling. “You can't go on people's whims alone, but you can harness the collective wisdom of teams. Combining the two makes for strong decision making.”

“The way to execute a strategy is to operationalize it and make it part of the natural rhythm,” he adds. “En-



Photo to top: Celestica CEO Rob Mionis, right, and staff enjoy a playful moment. Photo above: Rob Mionis addresses employee awards event. CELESTICA IMAGES

suring leadership teams are aligned with the culture you want to create takes a lot of personal investment and a strong management system. It begins with understanding your key values, where you want to take the company, and what's important to you and your customers.”

Mionis is especially proud of how strong and resilient Celestica's culture has become. “We have gone through a successful transformation and have a growth-oriented mindset based on a strategy defined in the early days of our transition. That was entirely credited to our people. They feel empowered, engaged, and are committed to our shared vision. When the entire team is connected and

working in unison, everything clicks.”

Celestica's growth and success is reflected in the company's performance. It has been a top performer on the TSX on multiple measures. From 2021 to the end of 2024, revenues increased by 71 per cent and the TSX stock price experienced an 841 per cent surge.

However, Celestica's success is not just based on numbers, says Mionis. “The most important piece is how satisfied and engaged our employees are and how good they feel to be part of a winning team.”

In the past 18 months, Celestica has been awarded numerous employer awards in Canada, including Canada's Most Admired Corpor-

ate Culture, Canada's Top Employers for Young People (2024 and 2025), Canada's Best Diversity Employers (2025), Canada's Best 50 Corporate Citizens (2023 and 2024), Canadian HR Award for Best Reward and Recognition Strategy (2024), Canadian HR Excellence Awardee for Next Generation Employment (2024) and Diversity and Inclusion (2023).

Mionis often tells other leaders that the only way to achieve long-lasting results is through empowering people to their full potential and collaborating with them to explore opportunities or resolve problems side by side. “Culture improves alignment and trust. It allows us to be curious, ask questions and innovate. When people have a sense of a shared goal, they work together to achieve that goal as a team.”

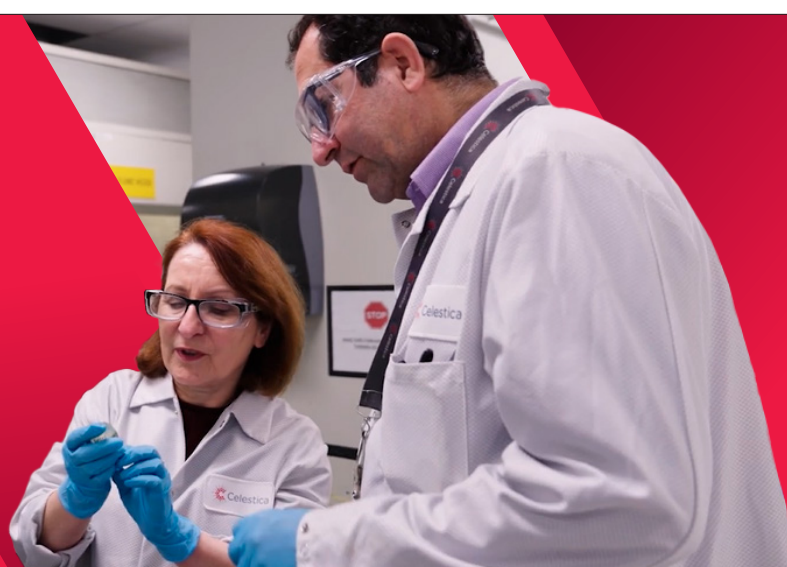
As the world faces new challenges, Mionis believes that the culture they have built will help them weather the inevitable ebbs and flows.

“Challenges don't break us — they make us stronger. We are motivated to work together to find solutions when we encounter obstacles. Rather than discouraging us, adversity brings us together and strengthens our resolve. We believe that open communication, thinking differently, and leading by example are the keys to finding solutions and identifying new opportunities. We are building a culture that is not only resilient but one that continues to evolve, inspire and drive success for years to come.”

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— MIKE KESSEL, PRESIDENT AND CEO, CLEVELAND CLINIC CANADA

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In 2009, Mike Kessel transitioned from a successful career in finance and accounting and as an entrepreneur to embrace a new direction as president and CEO of Cleveland Clinic Canada. Today, he's a winner in Canada's Most Admired CEO category and is widely recognized as a visionary leader in healthcare.

Kessel's career transition was a great opportunity to positively impact Canada's healthcare community and join one of the world's largest and most respected healthcare organizations. Founded in 1921, Cleveland Clinic is a nonprofit academic medical centre. In 2006, Cleveland Clinic Canada opened in Toronto as Cleveland Clinic's first international location where a highly engaged, multi-disciplinary team of physicians and wellness experts provides in-person care at clinics in Toronto and virtual care across Canada.

Under Kessel's leadership, he has grown Cleveland Clinic Canada's team from 30 to more than 400 caregivers and increased annual patient visits from 30,000 to more than 120,000. He also diversified its revenue streams through groundbreaking initiatives such as the Corporate Medical Director and Virtual Care programs, allowing it to expand its reach even further.

When Kessel saw the early challenges the organization faced, he realized there was much ground-work to be done. It started with developing a strong cultural foundation. Kessel's approach is predicated on three leadership principles: genuinely caring for people; understanding that healthcare is a team sport; and the need to innovate and forecast future needs.

“You have to show people how they matter, get to know people on your team, and show each other how they are really important. Greatness can be achieved if people are encouraged to work together.”

Another pillar was communication. “We're very clear about communicating our six core values: quality and safety, empathy, teamwork, integrity, inclusion and innovation,” he says.

Information-sharing and innovation have also played a key role, he says, to ensure leaders are empowered and have the tools they need to be successful.



Clockwise, from top: Mike Kessel with members of his senior leadership team (left) and additional Cleveland Clinic caregivers including global CEO and president, Dr. Tom Mihaljevic (right); recognizing a fellow caregiver for 30 years of nursing; honouring the nursing team during Nursing Week. CLEVELAND CLINIC CANADA IMAGES

Importantly, Kessel implemented a strategy around complementing the healthcare system and forging relationships with government ministries, academia, health science centres and other system stakeholders. “It's important to understand that it's not about competing against the public healthcare system, but rather about supporting and helping each other succeed.”

Cleveland Clinic Canada's collaborative efforts with the public system are among Kessel's proudest achievements. These include:

- a continuous improvement project with Sunnybrook Hospital's emergency department;

- a patient-experience training initiative with Mount Sinai, and

- provincial collaborations with the Ontario Ministry of Health and Manitoba Health.

His team also helps when the public system requires support. During the pandemic, for example, his clinical team delivered half a million COVID tests, set up more than 90 testing clinics, and initiated 155 pop-up corporate and public vaccine clinics, vaccinating almost 50,000 patients. “This approach has brought immense pride to our team,” says Kessel. “It's clear to everyone that we are here to help people, our healthcare system, and our country.”

Another noteworthy achievement was the 2020 launch of Express Care Online, a virtual care service that enables Canadians across the country to receive care for acute conditions from Cleveland Clinic Canada clinicians. This service improved accessibility and convenience for patients.

Kessel also takes pride in the day-to-day interactions of his teams. “People help each other out and are proud of the work they do here. It makes me very happy and proud to be able to share our culture with our patients and clients.”

He is quick to add that his approach to life and work is based on a simple foundation.

“I'm a big family guy. My own family provides a strong foundation for me to be a better person and bring better solutions for our caregivers and patients. Our guiding principle is that caregivers should treat patients and each other as family and Cleveland Clinic Canada as their home.”

Moving forward, Kessel says he plans to double down on what has been working, including empathy, relationship-building, intelligence-sharing and training. He also plans to build on the success of the Corporate Medical Director Program. The program, which currently supports over 20 industries and one million

employees, helps companies reduce organizational risk, improve overall employee health, wellness and safety, and drive company performance.

In describing his leadership style, Kessel distills it down to three basic principles: be yourself, be available, and build meaningful relationships. Kessel has also learned from several mentors along the way, starting with his parents. “My parents raised me to care about people and be genuine. That's an easy thing to emulate in business. They also taught me the importance of connecting the dots and listening to people's stories.”

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FOUNDED TO HELP PEOPLE ‘DO GOOD THINGS’

MT+ CO.

BEV CLINE
POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

When Rob Miller co-founded the Vancouver-based MT+ Co. law firm in 2009, he had a clear vision of what he wanted to achieve: ‘To help people do good things.’ ‘Good Things is based on the premise that we do our best work when we believe in what our clients are trying to achieve, and that a law firm can share values with its clients,’ says Miller. ‘That initial purpose statement is part of our firm’s DNA and is foundational in our culture. Life is too short to do things that don’t excite us.’

This year MT+ Co. was named one of 2024 Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Cultures by Waterstone Human Capital, in recognition of the firm’s winning culture.

MT+ Co. works exclusively with two types of clients: forward-thinking businesses, and Indigenous organizations on the cutting edge of reconciliation.

“For us, we’re really looking for clients who are doing big and important things that move the needle in ways that matter. Is it work that makes an impact? Is it work we believe in? We find this work in a really diverse client group that crosses a lot of industries and, increasingly, provincial and territorial borders.

“About half of the work we do is with Indigenous organizations. As a Canadian business that has the privilege of working with Indigenous people in Canada, we believe in the calls to action identified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” says Miller. He highlights the firm’s Truth and Reconciliation action plan that further identifies MT+ Co.’s commitments and goals surrounding reconciliation.

“This plan stands on equal footing with our strategic plans and directs our quarterly and annual objectives. It’s about us earning the right to work with Indigenous changemakers. And a big part of that is making sure we’re doing everything we can to be a good home for Indigenous professionals.”

Throughout the years, the purpose-driven law firm has expanded, nearly doubling its head count since 2019. In addition to moving from its original Vancouver Gastown footprint to a larger location in Vancouver, it has opened offices in Victoria and Toronto. The firm is in the process of opening an office in Yellowknife.



Top photo: MT+Co. Team attends the “Nooner at the Nat” baseball game courtesy of the Happiness Team.
Bottom Left: Navnit Duhra and Sasha Platz, principal lawyers in the business law group, meet in the Vancouver office.
Bottom Right: MT+Co. summer students’ annual photo. MT+ CO. PHOTOS

What makes Miller so proud is that the firm remains staunchly true to its culture and vision. As the firm has evolved, he says, so, too, has its understanding of that initial purpose statement. “Our world today is very different than it was in 2009. The next generation of business leaders have different priorities and a broader basket of stakeholders; Indigenous governments and economies are growing on their own terms and as a nation we continue to take steps down the path of reconciliation; what Canada builds and develops — and how we build and develop — has evolved; and the regulatory and legal landscape has dramatically shifted. To us, “good things” these days means sitting in the centre of all of this exciting change and helping organizations

contribute positively to this new Canada. It’s also about showing up as good humans in challenging situations. We recently looked at all of this in a purpose review, and realized that ‘good things’ today means ‘breathing humanity into law.’”

In the process, this has led to the development of the firm’s building blocks, explains Miller: the set of values that define them. “We asked everyone to think about the people that you admire most in the firm, the people that you appreciate working with the most in the firm, and to think about the characteristics that make them great.”

What resulted, he says, was a consensus on ‘yes, this is how we want to show up for each other,’ and led to the creation of our firm’s building blocks.” The building

blocks are Teams, Not Egos, Grateful + Positive, Mindful, Authentic + Equitable, Problem Solver and Owner Mindset.

According to Miller, the firm’s building blocks are foundational when working through the interview process, welcoming recruits and conducting performance reviews at the firm. Threading the firm’s building blocks principles throughout the processes ensures the team holds itself accountable for its commitments.

“We’ve all seen situations where’s there somebody that seems like a good fit, has a great résumé, can do the role you bring them in for, gets trained on all of the systems and processes, but — and this is a big ‘but’ — they don’t get trained on the unwritten expectations and norms that keep the unique and distinct

culture going.”

In contrast, at MT+ Co., which has a low monthly turnover rate of 1.2 per cent and a robust Culture Buddies program for new hires, “the building blocks represent who we are and how we expect to relate to each other. Because we integrate the building blocks into our feedback process, we expect recruits to embody and follow the ethos articulated in them.”

As MT+ Co. has grown it became evident, says Miller, that a more comprehensive leadership team was needed to support its development and growth. The firm has focused on building a robust management team, made up of practice group leaders and operational departmental leaders. “As an organization, you always need organizational hierarchy or

project-based hierarchy to make sure that you do good work, and that you do it efficiently, to make sure that you can actually make decisions within your firm and move forward.”

Still, staying faithful to the firm’s initial purpose statement and subsequent building blocks means that it’s important to separate organizational hierarchy and social hierarchy. That’s why the firm, since its beginning, has embedded the principle of “No Social Hierarchy,” a foundational belief reaffirmed in its building blocks and that informs the firm’s policies, total rewards and benefits packages. As such, financial statements are open to everyone, explains Miller, “so that we all understand how our business works, the challenges we’re facing, plus the opportunities we have.”

Miller says the firm is proud to be a pioneer in inclusive policies in the legal industry. At MT+ Co., everyone is recognized as valuable, regardless of position. The firm has a culture of open feedback and most of its programs and policies have come about through that feedback. Inclusivity is embedded throughout: “We have teams open to anyone who has an interest, right down to the newest hire that move the needle on important projects for us, that are the main drivers of people’s experience within the firm. The most impactful example is the firm’s Happiness Team, which has the mandate to make sure people have a meaningful and enjoyable experience at the firm.

“MT+ Co.’s culture is one of trust, mutual respect and dedication. Whether this manifests through its service offerings for its clients or in its relationships with one another, our culture is foundational to how we show up in the world. We spend a lot of our lives at work, and we believe that you should believe in what you do and who you do it with,” says Miller.

Looking ahead to the future of MT+ Co., Miller says that the firm’s vision is big and bold. As it has done since its founding, MT+ Co. will “continue to ‘do good things’ across the country where we see the Canadian economy is changing, new diverse business leaders are emerging, and stakeholders are different. At the center of this we see Indigenous economies becoming revitalized, and MT+ Co. is working hard to earn the privilege to support this major social, political and economic transformation. And we’re excited about where this will lead us.”

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