

CONNECTING THE DOTS



*Beyond Programs: How
Excellence Canada is Supporting
Health Sciences North as they
Build a Culture of Connection*



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Introduction

The problem is rarely effort. It is connection.

Across Canada, health care institutions (and organizations in every industry) invest heavily in wellness programs, leadership development, accreditation, and engagement surveys. Each initiative addresses a real need. Yet without integration, these efforts compete for attention. Staff struggle to see how the pieces fit together. Leaders sustain parallel systems instead of one unified strategy. Instead of moving the needle, programs can feel more like the flavour of the day.

Health Sciences North faced this challenge and chose a different path. HSN adopted the Excellence Canada Healthy Workplace Standard as a framework for connection, linking what already existed into a coherent system of accountability and continuous improvement. Their ultimate goal is to build a culture of empowerment and trust.

The question is no longer whether to invest in workplace culture. It is whether those investments work together to drive measurable outcomes. This paper tells the story of how HSN is answering that important question. It is written for leaders who recognize initiative overload in their own organizations and want a practical example of how integration, not addition, creates sustainable culture change.

Why “More” Is Not Always The Answer

In all sectors, including health care, leading organizations continue to prioritize wellness, engagement, safety, and culture.

This is especially true in the post-pandemic years. Many have invested deeply in new initiatives and leadership development. However, in conversations with people leaders and executives across Canada, a quiet worry often emerges: We're doing so much, but it all feels fragmented.

If this sounds familiar, you are not alone.

Hospitals and public institutions often become experts at adding programs. Each one addresses a legitimate need: violence prevention, mental health, burnout, engagement, diversity, accreditation, or recognition. The issue is not the effort, but the integration. Without connection, each new initiative competes for investment, bandwidth, and attention, often creating fatigue rather than progress.

At Health Sciences North (HSN), Northeastern Ontario's research and teaching hospital, based in Sudbury with 17 satellite locations across the region, leadership decided to take a different approach. Instead of introducing "one more thing," HSN re-imagined the workplace system around connection, linking leadership accountability with culture change, accreditation with wellness, and employee experience with patient care and outcomes.

Their experience shows how adopting the Excellence Canada Healthy Workplace Standard helps simplify rather than complicate.

This paper shares what HSN learned and what the people at HSN continue to learn. It is meant to help other organizations understand that an Excellence Canada implementation is not about compliance or another program to manage. It is about linking what you already do into a coherent system of trust, performance, and improvement.



The Challenge: Many Good Efforts, Little Connection

Health Sciences North, like most organizations, shares a similar landscape of overlapping efforts:

- **Healthy workplace and wellness initiatives**
- **Employee engagement and experience surveys**
- **Accreditation and quality standards**
- **Occupational health and safety programs**
- **Leadership development and accountability frameworks**
- **Patient or client experience and satisfaction data**

Each stream and program matters. But when introduced independently, they rarely intersect intentionally. Teams describe "initiative overload": multiple committees, separate reporting systems, and different champions all speaking slightly different languages.

This leads to an overload of messaging from too many messengers and unclear accountability for people leaders, with little being absorbed. Well-placed investments are often lost or misunderstood in a noisy environment where the demands on attention are high, and the power of linking programs to higher-level strategy is overlooked.

The result is that good work often loses visibility. Leaders are pressured to maintain many disconnected projects rather than a single integrated system. Progress slows under the weight of good intentions. Without clear strategic alignment, programs risk becoming line items, and in a difficult financial climate, even strong programs can more easily end up on the cutting block.

HSN's leadership recognizes this as a system design challenge, not a commitment issue.

Across the organization, people are engaged and capable. It's why they came into health care. What's often missing is connection and integration.

***"Sometimes we forget what we do really well, but also where we need alignment."** Julie Dénommé, Director, People, Safety and Development at HSN*



The Turning Point: From Activities to Systems

In 2025, HSN began its Healthy Workplace journey with Excellence Canada, achieving a Canada Award for Excellence at the Essentials/Silver level in November. From the beginning, the goal was clear: use the framework to create an integrated structure that complements existing efforts rather than competing with them.

The Excellence Canada framework serves as a foundation for connection. It allows HSN to align existing programs, such as engagement, safety, and patient experience, under one governance structure and under the umbrella of a healthy workplace culture.

The Healthy Workplace Standard became the framework that connects everything else. Accreditation, strategy, and workplace culture now reinforce one another rather than compete for attention, interest, investment and engagement.



"If you don't have structures and processes in place, it doesn't matter what your behavioural approach is."
David McNeil, President and CEO

Themes from the Journey: What Changed and Why It Works

1. Leadership Credibility Is the Foundation

Across hours of conversation with HSN stakeholders from across the organization, consistent messages and lessons emerge that illustrate both what changed at HSN and why it's working.

Clarity of direction and consistency of behaviour reshape trust.

"I am highly transparent, sometimes uncomfortably so." David McNeil, President and CEO of HSN.

Transparency means more than communication. It includes clear priorities, reliable feedback systems, and open reporting. When words, systems, and actions align, people begin to trust that commitments are real. Consistency and commitment outweigh perfection.

"If leaders aren't on board, where's the accountability?" Brenna Pugliese, Quality Improvement Consultant

Accountability becomes a developmental tool and is embedded in performance management systems. Goals are clear, and leaders are supported to achieve them. Clarity enables learning.

2. Inclusion Turns Systems into Communities

Engagement improves when people can see themselves in the system. HSN continues to make progress, knowing that engagement work is never complete.

"We haven't closed the loop yet to say, 'we hear you, and here's what we're doing.'" Dr. Grace Ma, HSN Physician Wellness Lead

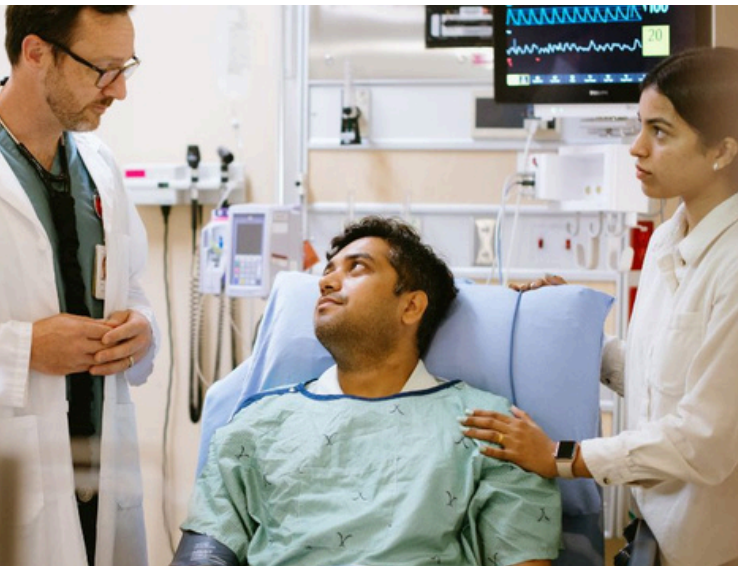
Dr. Ma, who represents physicians on HSN's wellness committee, is working to help doctors experience the organization's commitment to improving culture.



For physicians, nurses, and clinical staff, inclusion means being recognized as part of the system, not adjacent to it. For frontline teams, it means visible follow-up from leadership. For patient and family advisors, it means being included in planning, not only reviewing results afterward.

This broadened sense of inclusion shifts the focus from simply gathering feedback to demonstrating how that feedback informs decisions and drives change.

Themes from the Journey: What Changed and Why It Works



"Healthy workplace initiatives are not only physical and mental, but emotional and spiritual."

Hom Shrestha, Patient and Family Advisor

3. Well-Being and Service Quality Are One System

Healthy workplace efforts and patient care are **inseparable and holistic**.

Patients and families experience staff culture directly. When staff feel supported, communication improves; when they are exhausted, compassion suffers. This understanding reframes wellness from a series of self-care programs to intentional system design, creating conditions where quality depends on well-being rather than competing with it.

Hom Shrestha, who represents the voice of HSN patients and their families, goes on to say, "HSN's experience illustrates that a healthy workplace culture is not merely an isolated organizational goal, but it is deeply intertwined with patient care, equity, and systematic transformation."

4. Systems, Not Programs, Drive Change

HSN identified that success comes from connecting existing initiatives, not necessarily introducing new ones. By integrating goals, committees, and reporting systems, healthy workplace priorities are effectively operationalized and can provide stability during times of significant change. Well-being, quality improvement, accreditation, and engagement are explicitly woven into one model, reducing duplication and confusion.

"The hardest part is cascading it across the organization."

Julie Dénommé, Director of People, Safety and Development

Themes from the Journey: What Changed and Why It Works

5. Measurement Enables Decisions and Accountability

Measurement is becoming less about compliance and more about decision-making, curiosity and commitment.

"Results included significant reductions in workplace violence and improved system performance." Lisa Graham, Manager, Occupational Health and Safety

The next step for the organization is to strengthen the linking of data from engagement surveys, benefits, program utilization, incident reports, and patient feedback to better understand how workforce experiences influence outcomes. More than ever, data is used intentionally to drive leadership decisions, strategic planning, and goal-setting.



"We really came to the conclusion ... it's about empowering people."

*Jessica Diplock, VP,
People and Culture*

6. Alignment Reduces Fatigue and Builds Energy

Before adopting the Healthy Workplace Standard, many employees saw wellness, safety, and accreditation as separate streams of work. Unifying them reduces confusion and builds optimism.

"This is giving us that outlet to say, we're actually changing direction." Amanda Campagnaro, Registered Nurse

When alignment occurs, meetings that once focused on safety now also review wellness and engagement. Staff see every improvement effort as part of one story.

The Excellence Canada Journey: Third-Party Validation and National Recognition

For HSN, the journey began at the Essentials Level, the first tier of the Healthy Workplace Standard. At this stage, the task is to identify and connect existing systems rather than create new ones. The initial assessment serves as a mirror, showing how processes connect and where gaps exist. A Healthy Workplace Steering Committee leads the work. Each Driver of the framework, including Leadership, Planning, Risk Management, Implementation, and Evaluation, works systematically to provide clear direction on practices, results, and desired outcomes.

Progress continues along a deliberate path:

Getting Started: Rapid Assessment

The first step in the process is often a formal Rapid Assessment. This process brings front-line and senior leaders together to self-assess against the Standard and determine current state and gaps. It serves as the initial organizational diagnostic and sets the baseline.

Essentials/Silver Level Recognition

Across the organization, teams embedded the framework into daily management. Accreditation reviews, strategic goals, and board reporting use the same measures, connecting daily work to the journey to excellence.

Integration with Accreditation and Corporate Strategy

Across the organization, teams embedded the framework into daily management. Accreditation reviews, strategic goals, and board reporting reference the same measures, strengthening the connections between daily work and the journey to excellence.

Preparing for the Canada Awards for Excellence

As integration deepens, evidence of strategic alignment, progress reporting, and continuous improvement demonstrates stronger systems organization-wide. External verification included staff and stakeholder interviews and focus groups. This deep listening, facilitated by Excellence Canada Advisors, served as an internal maturity checkpoint.

Value Beyond Recognition

The first formal recognition milestone affirms that organizational commitment and foundational systems meet national standards for structure, safety, and engagement. It sets the stage for full implementation of the Healthy Workplace Standard. HSN views the ongoing journey not as a climb but as a continuous loop. The organization continues to build on the Healthy Workplace Standard's foundation to strengthen connected leadership, integrate strategies and programs, and continually improve culture as a means of weathering significant change.

"The award was the outcome. The real change was that people finally saw how everything fit together."

Julie Dénommé, Director of People, Safety and Development

What the Healthy Workplace Standard Does and What It Doesn't

The Excellence Canada model clarifies connections between existing compliance and quality systems rather than replacing them. For example, safety metrics from one framework most often satisfy requirements in another when documentation aligns. Instead of doubling work, the Standard allows teams to streamline it.

The framework acts as a "system of systems," showing overlap, removing redundancy, and clarifying shared goals. Certification turns compliance into alignment, reducing administrative burden and improving coherence.

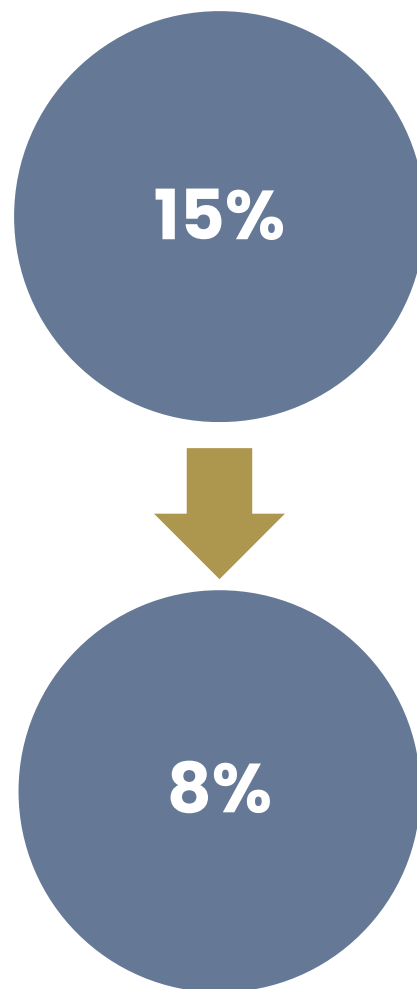


The Healthy Workplace Standard provides a strategic framework for adaptation and harmonizes various practices into an aligned management system for pursuing organizational goals. This strategic approach helps build and sustain a culture of excellence.

The Return on Connection

HSN is already starting to see a return on its investment in building its healthy workplace culture. Jessica Diplock, who leads HSN's People and Culture team, confirms that over the course of the last three years, HSN's employee turnover rate has been cut almost in half, from over **15% to approximately 8%** today. However, leadership emphasizes that attribution is complex and multifactorial. "I can't take credit for wellness being the silver bullet," says Diplock, "but we needed to have a people strategy."

It's the strategic alignment that ensures healthy workplace priorities and plans are optimized, leading to measurable outcomes.



HSN has begun to measure organizational impacts by monitoring results through:

Operational Improvements

- Reduced workplace violence incidents and improved reporting confidence
- Reduced absenteeism and improved workforce retention and stability
- Enhanced visibility across engagement and safety data
- Early evidence of improved patient experience survey results

Cultural Outcomes (validated through multiple Excellence Canada employee focus groups)

- Growing trust in leadership decision-making
- Stronger sense of purpose among staff
- Reduced initiative fatigue and survey cynicism

Strategic Value

- Unified governance linking wellness, safety, and accreditation
- Evidence-based communication of impact at the Board level
- National recognition through the Canada Awards for Excellence program

Why This Matters for Other Organizations

Some organizations hesitate to begin an Excellence Canada implementation journey, worried it will add work or overlap with existing compliance tools. HSN's experience demonstrates the opposite.

The Healthy Workplace Standard connects strategically what already exists and provides an anchor for continual improvement.



Implementing Excellence Canada Standards helps organizations:



1. Focus and align current initiatives



2. Translate values into measurable systems of practice



3. Reduce fatigue by showing how efforts connect



4. Strengthen accountability



5. Demonstrate progress through national recognition

The approach is designed to be flexible, meeting organizations where they are and providing the roadmap to a sustainable future.

Lessons Learned at HSN: How to Begin Without Overwhelming the System

1

Start where you are. Experience shows that many organizations already have **60-70 percent** of the needed elements in place for first-tier recognition. The Rapid Assessment will help triage the organization's current state, progress, and gaps.

2

Frame the work as integration, not addition. "As soon as we started likening the Excellence Canada framework to accreditation standards, everybody started saying, 'Oh yeah, that makes sense.'" Jessica Diplock

3

Involve key roles early. Build your ambassador cohort. In the case of HSN, that meant physicians and clinicians, board members, management, educators, and patient/family advisors.

4

Develop measurement dashboards that are meaningful and connected. Iterate until they make sense to stakeholders and consolidate dashboards where possible. Select metrics that are meaningful to the business.

5

Treat recognition as a milestone and a learning opportunity. A time to celebrate, but not a finish line.

The Deeper Message: Connection Is the Culture

CEO David McNeil sums up a key driving principle for building trust, a necessary pillar in driving positive culture change: "Transparency is the remedy for mistrust."

Culture emerges not from extra programs but from consistent systems and relationships that reinforce meaning. When structures align, trust follows.

At HSN, staff are beginning to see wellness, safety, engagement, and accreditation as facets of a single strategy. The organization acts as one connected system with a shared purpose: quality care through healthy, supported people. Staff understand that the work continues, but they are beginning to see positive impacts every day.

The Healthy Workplace implementation through Excellence Canada is a progressive journey that serves as the connective tissue to hold systems together and provide a common language across the organization.



"When you can tap into the power of community and connect people, you empower your teams and leverage a whole new level of strength in what you're able to achieve." - Brenna Pugliese, Quality Improvement Consultant

Moving Forward

For organizations considering this journey, the most powerful step is to reframe what "excellence" means. It is not a label but a discipline of alignment that continues to clarify what's most important for a healthy, supportive workplace.

HSN continues to evolve, demonstrating that excellence complements, rather than competes with, accreditation, safety, or wellness. When organizations connect existing dots, direction becomes clear, and culture becomes lived experience. Building a culture where people feel involved and in which they participate is critical. According to Jessica Diplock, "Empowering people is what makes it sustainable."

Learn more about building a connected, high-performing workplace at excellence.ca



Conclusion

The problem was never effort. Health Sciences North, like most organizations, was already doing the work. The challenge was making that work visible, coherent, and sustainable.

By adopting the Excellence Canada Healthy Workplace Standard, HSN did not add another initiative to manage. It created a structure that revealed how existing programs already served a common purpose. Wellness, safety, accreditation, and engagement became facets of one system rather than competing priorities. When leadership accountability and the frontline experience are aligned under a shared framework, trust follows.

The results are starting to speak for themselves: reduced turnover, fewer workplace violence incidents, stronger engagement, and a growing sense among staff that their contributions matter and connect to something larger. These outcomes did not come from working harder. They came from working together. People from across HSN are quick to remind anyone who asks that the work is not done, that it's ongoing, and that everyone has a part to play.

For other organizations considering this path, HSN's experience offers clear direction. The framework does not replace what you do. It connects it. And when connection becomes the strategy, culture stops being an aspiration and translates to an engaged, high-performing workplace where people feel valued. Excellence is not a destination. It is a discipline of alignment, practiced intentionally and continuously, that makes complexity simpler and purpose clearer. HSN's journey is proof that when organizations stop adding and start connecting, the real change begins.



Contributors



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About Health Sciences North

HSN is Northeastern Ontario's regional specialized referral centre and research institute, providing advanced medical services and specialized care to more than 557,000 people across 300,000 square kilometres. As the region's academic health sciences centre, we are dedicated to excellence in healthcare, education, and research to improve health outcomes for people in the region, while training the next generation of healthcare professionals.

We provide comprehensive health services in both French and English, ensuring accessible and culturally sensitive care for patients and families from before birth to the end of life.

In addition to these services, through the Health Sciences North Research Institute, we also deliver cutting-edge research focused on cancer solutions, cardiovascular health, healthy aging, Indigenous Health, mental health and addictions.

Being socially accountable is our shared commitment to addressing the priority health needs of the population.

Northeastern Ontario is becoming more diverse, and together, we believe in fostering an environment of equity, diversity, inclusion, anti-racism and accessibility that is safe and welcoming for all. This includes meeting the needs of Indigenous, Francophone, Black, People of Colour, 2SLGBTQIA+, older adults, kids, people living with disabilities, equity-deserving and other marginalized groups. We are dedicated to delivering exceptional care that prioritizes the involvement of patients, their families, and healthcare providers in decision-making.

By working together, we aim to enhance the overall care experience, improve health outcomes, and support a personalized, effective and compassionate healthcare experience.



About Excellence Canada

As Canada's national authority on Quality and Healthy Workplace® practices, Excellence Canada has created a uniquely Canadian model, providing measurable standards and objective validation through its certification programs. Since inception, Excellence Canada has helped thousands of organizations in Canada, across many industries, to implement continual quality improvement systems and employee wellness strategies.



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