

# 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.

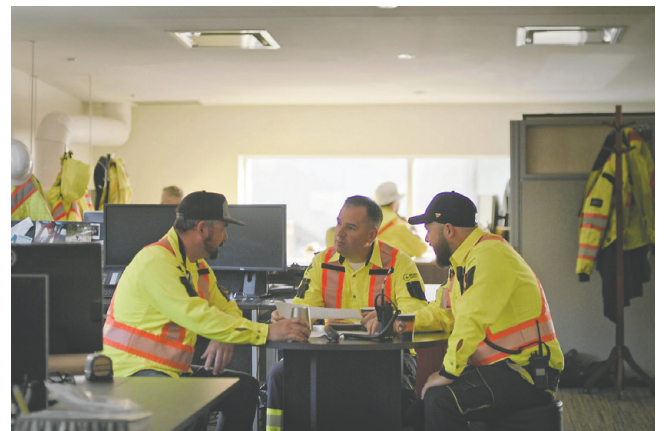
“When pendulums swing in business, it takes time for organizations to come back fully. This year’s Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Cultures Award winners have proven they are focused on doing the right things for their people while driving productivity,” says Marty Parker, president and CEO of Waterstone 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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High-performance cultures aren’t born, they’re built — and at Waterstone, we’re here to help you find and develop better leaders, build better cultures, and get better results.

On behalf of Waterstone, congratulations to this year’s Canada’s Most Admired Corporate Cultures™, Canada’s Most Admired CEO™, and Canada’s Most Admired Chief People and Culture Officer™ award winners.

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