



# Correctional Service Canada

## Organizational Culture Research Among Correctional Service Canada Employees

Executive Summary

November 2023

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This public opinion research report presents the results of a national survey conducted with 3,413 CSC employees using an online survey. The survey was conducted from June 27 to October 4, 2022. It also presents the findings from 37 online focus groups and 122 telephone and online individual depth interviews in which 318 CSC employees participated between October 11, 2022 and October 18, 2023.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Recherche sur la culture organisationnelle chez les employés du Service correctionnel du Canada

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Signed:



The image shows a handwritten signature in black ink on a white background. The signature is cursive and appears to read 'Rick Nadeau'. The signature is positioned above the typed name and title.

November 17, 2023  
Rick Nadeau, President  
Quorus Consulting Group Inc.

# Executive summary

## Background and research objectives

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) is the federal government agency responsible for administering sentences of a term of two years or more, as imposed by the courts. During the past few years, CSC has undertaken several initiatives to better understand and improve on its organizational culture. One of the most important aspects of establishing a diverse, equitable and inclusive workspace is understanding an organization's unique workplace culture. **Workplace culture** refers to the shared values, beliefs and assumptions that characterize members of an organization and define its nature.

The Service has publicly stated understanding and improving its culture is a priority. At the heart of this effort, CSC undertook an audit of organizational culture, with the objective of determining whether its actual organizational culture is in line with its desired one. One source of evidence to be used for the engagement was employee research, occurring with staff from four areas of focus within Correctional Service Canada: National Headquarters (NHQ); Regional Headquarters (RHQ); Federal Institutions; and Community Offices.

The research was designed to align with the audit criteria which included:

1. **Tone from the top:** Senior management has defined CSC's values and emphasizes their importance while holding management accountable to appropriately execute their duties.
2. **Engagement of Middle Managers:** Managers ensure that the vision and mission of the organization are being respected by all employees by modelling appropriate behaviour and creating a culture of inclusiveness.
3. **Open Dialogue:** Management actively gathers and listens to feedback from employees at all levels and positions across the organization.
4. **Clear Communication:** Management reinforces the values and CSC's culture through clear communication of expectations across the organization.
5. **Employee Engagement:** All employees are engaged in discussions on how to fulfill CSC's mission, and all staff are working towards the same goal.
6. **Recognition and Consequences:** Management ensures employee recognition of successful events and outcomes and applies appropriate discipline when required.

CSC employees were provided an opportunity to participate in this engagement through an online survey, focus groups and individual interviews.

## Methodology

### Quantitative research

The research methodology consisted of an online survey with CSC employees. Quorus was responsible for coordinating nearly all aspects of the research project including advising on the design of the research instrument, coordinating specific aspects of data collection and delivering the required research report.

- The goal was to conduct a census of the CSC staff. The database of roughly 19,661 eligible survey candidates, provided by CSC, was used to distribute the individual links to each employee through an email survey invitation.
- Respondents had the choice to complete the survey in English or French and were informed of their rights under the Privacy and Access to Information Acts.
- The survey took on average 25 minutes to complete and consisting of both open and closed-ended questions. Data collection occurred between June 27 and October 4, 2022, which included a pretest of 16 surveys conducted in English and five in French.
- A total of 3,413 surveys were completed. The equivalent margin of error for a probability study of 3,413 cases would be +/-1.5%. The final participation rate for this study was 17%.

All research was conducted in accordance with the *Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Research – Online Surveys*.

### Qualitative research

The qualitative phase of this project consisted of online focus groups and 1-on-1 telephone and web-based depth interviews. In total, 37 online focus groups and 122 telephone and online individual depth interviews were completed, in which 318 CSC employees participated between October 11, 2022 and October 18, 2023. All focus groups and depth interviews were held with employees within Correctional Service Canada, targeting various occupational groups and work locations to be as reflective of the target audience as possible.

Quorus was responsible for coordinating all aspects of the research project including working with CSC in designing and translating the invitation scripts and the moderation guide, coordinating all aspects of participant recruitment, managing the data collection platforms and related logistics, moderating all sessions and interviews, and delivering required reports at the end of data collection.

- The online focus groups typically lasted 1.5 to 2 hours each, and the depth online and telephone interviews were each approximately 60 minutes.
- Employees were contacted and invited to attend by email by Quorus. CSC took additional measures to promote participation.
- Employees could participate in the official language of their choice.
- All online focus groups and interviews were done via MSTeams while those participating in an interview had the choice to participate by telephone or online via MSTeams.
- Research participants were not offered an incentive for their participation.

All research was conducted in accordance with the *Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Research – Qualitative Research*.

## Summary of research findings

### Quantitative research results

#### A. Overall perceptions of culture at CSC

##### Workplace culture

When asked to rate the quality of the current workplace culture at CSC, more than two in five staff members (41%) described the current culture as poor or very poor, while more than one in five (21%) provided very good or excellent ratings.

More than a third of employees (37%) felt that not much had changed when asked to reflect on the direction in which the workplace culture they have experienced has changed over the past few years. Results were mixed with 33% feeling culture has been headed in the wrong direction and 27% feeling it has generally been headed in the right direction.

##### Most appreciated aspects of organizational culture

Employees were asked to describe which aspects of current organizational culture they appreciated or felt positive towards. Results reveal that 36% of staff referenced elements related to employee engagement – this was by far the most common theme. This was followed by 13% of respondents referring to aspects of open dialogue, and 11% touching on recognition and consequences.

Within each of these themes, employees more specifically referred to the following:

- Under employee engagement, employees most commonly described elements of teamwork and morale in the workplace (16%) as well as having a diverse and inclusive work environment (13%).
- Under open dialogue, employees more specifically referred to appreciation for involving employees in the change in culture (4%), informed communication with managers (4%), and importance placed on well-being and support check-ins (3%).
- Comments related to recognition and consequences mostly focused on feeling proud about the work they do and that their contribution is appreciated (8%).

### Most liked aspects of workplace environment

When asked to describe what they like the most about working at CSC, roughly two in three staff referred to aspects related to employee engagement (66%). Aspects that were a distant second and third related to tone from the top (19%) and benefits and compensation (18%).

Within these themes, employees referred to the following:

- Specific comments related to employee engagement included a sense of teamwork (26%), a belief that their work is fulfilling (19%) and challenging (13%), general job satisfaction (8%) and employment stability (8%).
- When referring to tone from the top, employees focused mostly on the importance placed on organizational mission including rehabilitation and public safety (19%).
- Feedback related to benefits and compensation focused mostly on various benefits including health, vacation, and sick leave among others (12%), as well as receiving a good salary and getting paid on time (11%).

### Least liked aspects of work environment

When asked to describe their least liked aspects of their work environment, more than a third of staff (35%) cited issues related to employee engagement, while 25% referred to aspects related to recognition and consequences, 23% referred to engagement of middle management, and 21% referred to tone from the top.

Within each of the themes, employees more specifically referred to the following:



- Under employee engagement comments included a toxic work environment (14%), no sense of teamwork (14%), a lack of dedicated staff (6%), and a lack of diversity (4%).
- Under recognition and consequences comments included a lack of appreciation in the workplace (13%) as well as systemic issues of racism, harassment, and sexism (12%).
- References to middle management included mostly issues with a lack of support, accountability, and leadership from managers or supervisors (22%).
- References to tone from the top mostly focused on unfair promotions and hiring practices (10%), a lack of focus on meaningful work (4%), and a lack of focus on organizational mandates and mission (4%).

## B. Audit criteria drill-down

### Open dialogue

Results revealed that 50% of employees strongly disagreed or disagreed that employee feedback is considered when making decisions. A similar proportion (47%) also strongly disagreed or disagreed that management gathers feedback from employees throughout the organization. A third of staff strongly disagreed or disagreed that they are provided with sufficient opportunities to be heard through activities like team meetings, town halls, etc. (34%), while 26% would not feel comfortable asking questions and speaking up in team meetings and town halls.

### Employee engagement

The area that warrants the most attention relates to whether all staff are on the same page when it comes to working towards CSC's mission and priorities, as nearly half of employees (47%) strongly disagreed or disagreed that staff are on the same page.

Equal proportions of staff (38%) agreed and disagreed that management clearly communicates its expectations to employees to reinforce the type of culture it is looking to achieve.

Half of employees (50%) feel supported in the work they do and a slim majority (56%) feel they are part of the team. While these findings are certainly positive for CSC, the findings that also reveal that one in three staff members do not feel supported in the work they do and that one in four do not feel like they are part of the team cannot be overlooked.

The most positive results related to employee engagement pertain to whether staff know how they can contribute to achieving CSC's mission and priorities (74%) and when it comes to understanding (89%) and agreeing (81%) with CSC's mission and priorities. Nearly seven times as

many employees strongly agreed that they understand how they can contribute towards achieving CSC's mission and priorities compared to strongly disagree results (27% vs. 4%).

### Clear communication

Results revealed that nearly half of staff strongly disagreed or disagreed that the communication approaches CSC employs are efficient and work well (47%). A lower although still notable proportion (40%) also strongly disagreed or disagreed that CSC's organizational culture is clearly defined and understood.

### Recognition and consequences

A slight majority of staff either strongly disagreed or disagreed that management is consistent when disciplining employees when it is required (53%) while half strongly disagreed or disagreed that CSC provides appropriate recognition for a job well done (50%). As well, over twice as many staff strongly disagreed or disagreed that disciplinary consequences that staff face for their actions were fair as there are who strongly agreed or agreed that they are fair (42% vs. 20%).

If there is something on which staff generally agree is that they have a clear understanding of the types of performance and behaviours that will lead to being disciplined (70%).

### Engagement of middle management

While 30% of employees strongly agreed or agreed that middle management is empowered to do their job and support the culture, a greater proportion strongly disagreed or disagreed (44%). The trend is reversed when it comes to managers and supervisors at CSC encouraging employees to respect the vision and mission of the organization by modelling the appropriate behaviour (44% generally agree while 33% generally disagree).

### Tone from the top

For nearly all statements considered, a greater proportion of staff disagreed than agreed. Nearly half of all employees (46%) either strongly disagreed or disagreed that senior management consistently demonstrates the desired culture through their actions. Similar results (43%) were obtained when staff were asked if they felt that senior management holds managers and supervisors accountable for their actions. Similarly, 43% either strongly disagreed or disagreed that they are kept informed of the actions that are being taken to obtain the culture senior management would like to see at CSC.

The balance tips slightly in favour of agreement when staff were asked whether senior management effectively communicates the type of culture it would like to see at CSC. For this metric, 41% generally agreed while 37% generally disagreed.

## Average score summary

The resulting index scores revealed that CSC is performing highest at employee engagement (3.5), with moderately negative neutral scores observed for all other criteria.

<b>Favourable scores:</b>	<b>Moderately negative neutral scores:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Employee engagement (3.5)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Open dialogue (2.9)</li><li>• Engagement of middle management (2.9)</li><li>• Recognition and consequences (2.9)</li><li>• Tone from the top (2.8)</li><li>• Clear communication (2.8)</li></ul>

## Extent of impact of COVID-19 pandemic

Employees were asked to consider whether any changes at CSC resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced the organizational culture at CSC, and if so, in which manner.

A quarter of staff (25%) believe that the changes made have worsened CSC's organizational culture, while 13% believe that the changes made have improved culture. Most of the remaining employees (40%) described the changes as having mixed results on the organizational culture. More than one in ten employees (15%) did not notice any impact of the changes on culture at CSC, while 7% preferred not to provide an answer.

## Perceived improvements to culture during the pandemic

Employees who noticed changes to the culture were then asked to describe specific examples of changes that have worsened the culture at CSC. Results reveal that a slight majority of employees mentioned an aspect related to workload and hybrid work (52%). This was by far the most common theme on which employees touched. The next two themes most commonly raised included the following: 22% of staff referred to an aspect related to employee engagement, while 18% focused on various improvements to operations.

Within each of the themes, employees referred to the following:

- Comments related to workload and hybrid work mainly focused on the option to work from home (44%), as well as flexibility and accommodation in the schedule (21%).
- When referring to an aspect of employee engagement, employees touched on improvements to employee morale and teamwork (8%), engagement via virtual meetings (8%), as well as an improved sense of productivity and autonomy (7%).

- Improvements to operations mostly referred to an increase in the use of new initiatives and technology (9%), implementing best practices for COVID safety (4%), improved cleanliness (3%), as well as improvements to service and population control (3%).

Nearly one in five employees could not think of any positive impact on culture because of pandemic-related changes at CSC (17%).

### Perceived deteriorations to culture during the pandemic

Staff raised a variety of ways in which culture changed for the worse with four particular themes representing the bulk of responses. First, 31% referred to negative changes related to workload and hybrid work. This was then followed by aspects of work related to tone from the top (25%), open dialogue (24%), and employee engagement (21%).

Within each of these themes, employees referred to the following:

- Comments related to workload and hybrid work included excessive workload (15%), frustration with the manner in which work from home was rolled out and with the negative impact of this policy (13%), and the sense that CSC does not see the benefit of hybrid work options (5%).
- Issues related to tone from the top primarily focused on perceptions of inadequate response to the pandemic (19%), and a lack of focus on CSC's mission and mandates (5%).
- Issues related to open dialogue primarily revolved around a greater sense of division both within and between groups, and increased sciolism (22%).
- Comments related to employee engagement included the impact on teamwork and productivity caused by staff working at home (6%), a lack of in-person interactions (6%), a lack of dedication among staff (4%) and feelings of isolation both at home and at the office (4%) among others.

### Proposed changes to workplace culture

When asked to specify one thing they would change about CSC's culture, the two most popular themes were employee engagement and open dialogue (29% respectively). The next most common set of recommendations related to improvements in job recognition and consequences (16%).

Within each of these themes, employees referred to the following:

- When touching on employee engagement, employees are more specifically seeking changes to foster a more positive work environment (13%), changes that promote

camaraderie (10%), as well as changes to improve equity and inclusiveness (7%), among other suggestions.

- Changes related to open dialogue primarily focused on a need for improved communication and interaction between managers and employees (18%). Additional suggestions included consulting with employees when making changes (5%), and engaging employees in decisions (4%).
- Suggestions related to recognition and consequences included addressing the lack of accountability or of a clear process to address incidents (10%), as well as a need for equal accountability in job performance (7%).

## Qualitative research results

### Overall perceptions of workplace culture

Each interview and focus group gave staff an opportunity to describe what they liked the best about the work they do at CSC and, if anything, what they are most proud of in their work at CSC. They also highlighted what they considered most challenging about their work at CSC.

The two most common themes that surfaced when describing what they liked the best included the type of work they do and the people with whom they work. Beyond the work and the people, other aspects of working at CSC that were mentioned as highlights for some staff included job security, good compensation, and the benefits package.

When discussing what they are most proud of in their work at CSC, a variety of themes emerged. Common themes included specific accomplishments (such as having participated on special assignments or in special projects), having successfully progressed through the organization, and the work they have done with their clients, whether those are offenders or staff. Managers, especially senior managers, would often say they are proud of their team and what their team has been able to accomplish.

While most participants were proud of the work they do and that they liked certain aspects of the work they do, they all face challenges. In some cases, one or two specific challenges overshadow all others and in other cases, the variety and number of challenges were too many to list. Some of the more common challenges faced by staff can best be summarized as follows:

- Excessive workload / too few resources.

- Constantly changing priorities / the organization is reactive and not proactive / the organization is overly reactive to external forces (e.g., political, public opinion, media, labour partners, etc.).
- Rather than creating teachable moments, the organization focuses on “the blame game.”
- A “toxic” work environment: working with offenders is difficult / working with other staff is difficult / managers are not managing / there is too much favouritism.
- Accountability without authority / too much centralization / too much upwards delegation.
- Prioritizing process over purpose / losing sight of the mandate.
- Lack of emphasis on staff wellbeing / too little staff recognition.
- Inadequate attention paid to departments outside of “operations.”
- Staff do not feel as though their voice is being heard.
- Lack of good managers and/or genuine leadership at multiple levels.
- Lack of a cohesive and concerted effort to achieve the mandate / the organization is fractured in many ways / everyone works in silos / departments do not collaborate / there is a divide between staff and management and between NHQ and many other parts of the organization.

Finally, to get a quick sense of overall culture at CSC, respondents were asked to select one or two words that they feel best describes the current culture. Many participants felt that trying to describe the overall culture at CSC was quite impossible – they tended to feel that CSC was an agglomeration of many sub-cultures. This led many to suggest that the overall culture is multi-faceted, complex, incoherent, broken and divided.

By focusing on the culture they experience on a regular basis, participants tended to use a variety of terms which more often than not reflected or captured some of the main challenges they encounter in their workdays. Some of the more common ways in which culture was described was toxic, challenging, thankless, hierarchical, reactive, lacking accountability, risk-averse, unchanging, and process-driven. Some do see the culture in a positive light, in which case terms such as professional, team-focused, dedicated, and hard-working were used.

### Exploring open dialogue and employee engagement

Participants were invited to share their thoughts on how well they feel management performs in terms of actively gathering and listening to feedback from employees at all levels and positions in the organization. Participants were fairly unified in thinking that the organization is quite effective

at gathering feedback from employees, but performs quite poorly when it comes to actively listening to that feedback.

There is widespread belief that efforts aimed at open dialogue and employee engagement are artificial. As well, employees feel that while they are invited to share feedback, they do not believe this feedback is taken into consideration and probably not even heard.

For the most part, the discussion around open dialogue and employee engagement leaves most employees feeling like the manner in which decisions are taken at CSC is best described as top-down rather than collaborative.

### Exploring clear communication

Communication at CSC represented somewhat of a paradox for staff – on the one hand it was considered plentiful if not excessive and on the other hand it was also seen as lacking and ineffective.

When assessing corporate communication, employees would focus almost exclusively on the emails they receive. These were seen as professional and comprehensive, however their volume was almost always considered overwhelming, and their relevance often deemed lacking. This has compelled many to be very selective in reading these emails.

The various challenges related to email communication at CSC lead many to value verbal communication, especially at the team level. Those who feel that communication overall is working well at CSC also tend to be employees who believe that team-level communication is strong.

Certain changes that happened at CSC because of the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on communications. Employee views of those changes are mixed. The increase in videoconference meetings was seen by some as an opportunity for their team to meet more often and more efficiently. On the other hand, the fact that some staff were working from home hindered opportunities for some teams to meet as often as they used to or even to meet as needed.

The weekly messages from the Commissioner received mixed reviews. Many staff appreciated that the Commissioner is communicating directly with them, they liked that this communication showcases what is happening in other parts of the organization and that it conveys and reinforces the organization's values. Those who connected less well with this communication felt that it consistently overlooked challenges with which they contend regularly and instead, focuses on "priorities" and storylines that they consider quite secondary.

## Exploring employee recognition and consequences

Employee recognition was seen through two lenses – formal and informal recognition. While many believe that the means for formal recognition are adequate and realistic, there remain many weaknesses including lack of awareness and use of these mechanisms, and if they are used, they are not given to the employee in a timely fashion. Ultimately, the way formal recognition is managed at CSC leaves many with the feeling that employee recognition is an afterthought and a low priority at CSC.

Informal recognition at CSC received mixed reviews. Many, especially but not exclusively frontline employees, seem to believe that this is not part of CSC's culture. Others, especially those with good working relationships with their immediate supervisor, believe that they receive informal recognition in a timely and authentic manner which leaves them feeling that recognition is well done at CSC.

Ultimately, employees almost always conclude that how well employee recognition is done depends on the supervisor or manager.

Employee discipline also received mixed reviews although the general sense is that CSC's performance is lacking. Although there is consensus that the policies are clear in terms of what should lead to discipline and that discipline does follow a progression in line with policy, many argue that there remains too much latitude for managers and the overall process at CSC is flawed on many fronts. Some of the more frustrating aspects as noted by employees included the following:

- Some feel that managers in general are held to a different standard.
- Favouritism was seen as responsible for sparing certain staff from discipline when it was warranted and it was seen as responsible for disciplining others unnecessarily.
- The disciplinary process is seen as taking far too long.
- The disciplinary process is considered cumbersome for managers.
- Some believe that staff who should be disciplined are often either moved to a different team or location or they are promoted.
- Discipline is too quickly administered for what some might consider relatively minor "errors" or "oversights" while discipline is not adequately or consistently administered for more severe actions.

That said, not everyone who participated in this research believes that employee discipline at CSC is flawed. Although there were exceptions, a general trend seemed to emerge that the higher in the hierarchy one worked, the more positive discipline in the organization was seen.



All things considered, a common sentiment among staff in various positions and levels of the organization is that CSC is seen as quick to discipline and slow to recognize employees.

### Exploring engagement of middle managers

There was widespread agreement that the culture that an employee experiences is largely determined by their manager or supervisor. While many believe that it would be impossible for all CSC managers to fit the mold of what they consider an “ideal”, there is also a common belief that there is room for improvement. A common weakness seen in CSC managers is that while they might be good “managers” they are not necessarily well equipped to lead.

An important part of the discussion regarding managers focused on what the organization could do to develop managers that are more likely to meet staff expectations and who foster the ideal workplace culture. Some of the more common suggestions included:

- Many seem to believe that there are too many acting managers which in turn weakens management at CSC overall.
- Favouritism too often results in individuals without management skills being selected for key positions.
- The competition process for management positions should take a more holistic view of the individual’s skillset.
- There seems to be inadequate time for shadowing and mentorship which leads to too much “trial by fire”.
- There are still too many managers who adhere to and believe in an archaic, paramilitary form of management which is anchored in a “command and obey” approach rather than what many consider a more modern holistic approach to management.
- Finally, both staff and managers explained that managers are overworked and under-resourced and do not have enough time to follow management training.

A role that many agree a manager should play is to foster a culture of inclusiveness. Feedback would suggest that there has been progress on this front over the years, especially in terms of gender inclusiveness, but there remains quite a bit of work ahead.

### Exploring “tone from the top”

Employees also all agreed that the culture that an organization experiences is in many ways set by what is said and done by that organization’s leadership team. For the most part, the focus of this discussion was on the Commissioner since few staff knew or had heard of anyone else at the executive level.

Employees believe leadership is contributing to an ideal workplace culture through the following:

- Communicating the organization’s values and priorities.
- Messaging from the Commissioner highlighting key achievements and struggles experienced at all levels of the organization.
- The audit on organizational culture and the associated research with employees was seen as overdue, necessary and a step in the right direction in terms of understanding culture at CSC.

What tends to be frustrating for staff is that many of the priorities and values at the heart of communications “from the top”, while nice to hear, important and honorable, come across as largely disconnected from what is happening on the frontlines. There is a widespread belief, especially as one gets closer to the frontline, that CSC is “not walking the talk.”

#### **Qualitative research disclaimer**

Qualitative research seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively projectable measures. The purpose is not to generate “statistics” but to hear the full range of opinions on a topic, understand the language participants use, gauge degrees of passion and engagement and to leverage the power of the group to inspire ideas. Participants are encouraged to voice their opinions, irrespective of whether or not that view is shared by others.

Due to the sample size, the special recruitment methods used, and the study objectives themselves, it is clearly understood that the work under discussion is exploratory in nature. The findings are not, nor were they intended to be, projectable to a larger population.

Specifically, it is inappropriate to suggest or to infer that few (or many) real world users would behave in one way simply because few (or many) participants behaved in this way during the sessions. This kind of projection is strictly the prerogative of quantitative research.

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