

CASE STUDY

ACT PATHOLOGY'S CULTURAL CHANGE JOURNEY



ACT
Government

Canberra Health
Services

This Case Study is an **interview** with **Dr Glenn Edwards**, the Executive Director of ACT Pathology.

The interview was **conducted** by **Jacqui Parle**, Director BPA Analytics.

BPA has been measuring the Organisational Culture of this service **since 2005**.

This Case Study **provides practical tips** for leaders in bringing about Cultural Change, against a backdrop of significant external challenges.

Enjoy the read!



Jacqui Parle
Director
BPA Analytics

"Dr Edwards, firstly thank you for taking the time to answer my questions about the 'culture change' journey in ACT Pathology! And congratulations on your most recent results.

Firstly, how long have you been the 'head honcho' in CHS ACT Pathology?"

"You are welcome, Jacqui. It certainly has been a journey, of which my team is very proud, so it is great to have the opportunity to reflect on it with you.

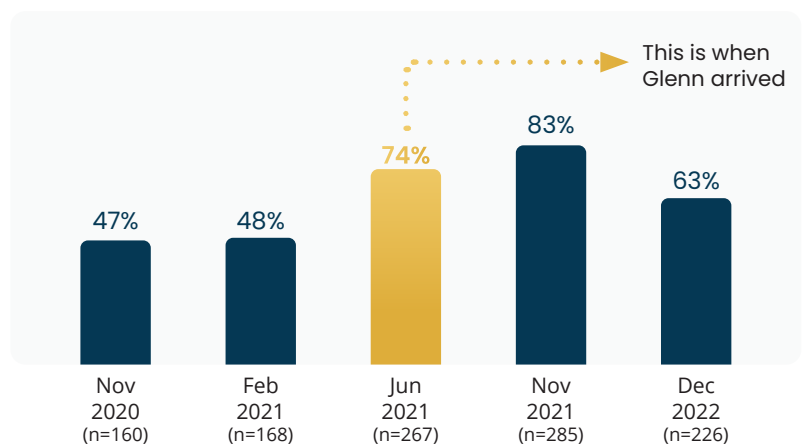
I commenced at Canberra Health Services in May 2021. It was an interesting time, as issues with workplace culture across CHS were prominent in the local media and much discussed internally. And ACT Pathology was no exception, having struggled with some challenging results on the BPA surveys over the years.

Oh, and thanks for making me chuckle – "head honcho" invokes some rather old school notions of senior leadership, doesn't it? I am pleased to say we have moved away from those times."



Glenn Edwards
Executive Director
ACT Pathology

ACT Pathology's Response Rate for the past 5 years



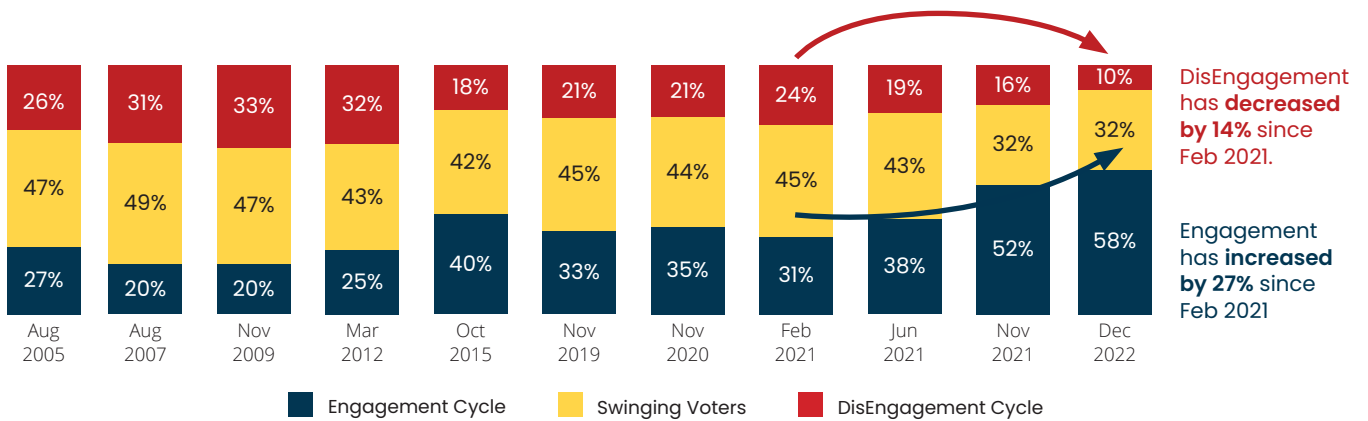
Using BPA's Model of Engagement, in 2022

ACT Pathology is typed as a Culture of Ambition.

Q. BPA has enjoyed a long relationship with Canberra Health Service, and we have measured the level of Engagement in ACT Pathology since 2005. In the December 2022 Pulse Survey you have achieved the highest Level of Engagement we have seen in the life of the BPA Survey in Pathology Services – now at 58% so close to a Culture of Success.

You must be very proud!

Glenn – how did you do this ... what tips or advice do you have for others?



A. “Yes it really is a fantastic result. I think we all knew that things were improving - but this result, coming at a time when many of the team were already tired after COVID and in the midst of a major new IT project, has blown us all away!

There have been some key factors in this success. First, I can't stress enough the importance of strong, clear signals from the CHS senior leadership. Our CEO Dave Peffer has put “living the values” as his top priority and his clear and unequivocal messaging has provided coherence and reassurance to people that change is real – and of course this has been a huge support for me in my role. Enabling positive culture change will be a lot harder if you are going it alone.

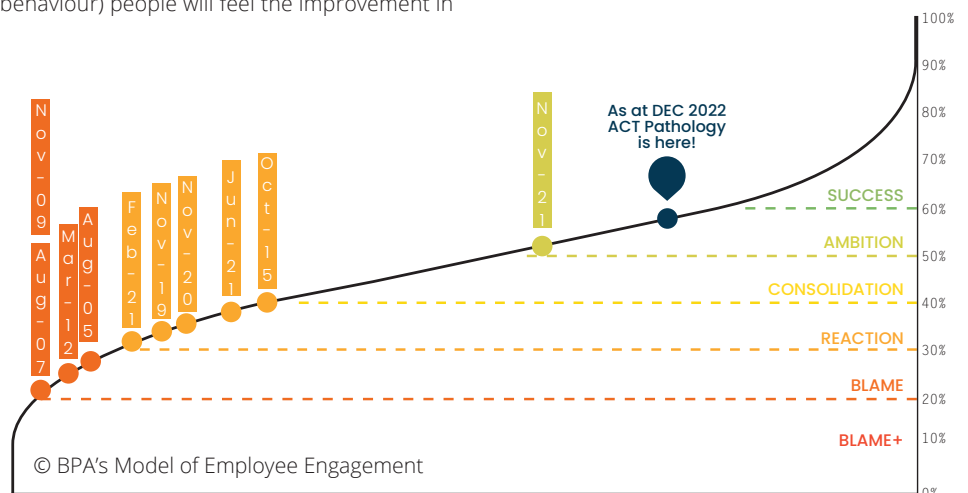
Second piece of advice: make workplace culture your top priority, and make it visible. Spend time on the data and with the teams, dig down to understand what is really driving culture, and walk the talk. Understand what “living the values” actually means. It is not fluffy jargon – it means providing a safe and progressive

workplace that enables people to thrive at work. Overcommunicate on these issues – talk directly to the wider team. People need to feel they can trust you, and that your commitment to change is real, and they need to hear it from the horse's mouth.

Third: understand where the power is. If workplace culture has been poor for a while, then there are people or systems that are keeping it that way. Addressing these blockers needs courage and determination. But if you can make these changes (eg dealing with bad behaviour) people will feel the improvement in

the workplace, they will see that you are living the values and they will follow suit. And the culture will follow.

A warning: The forces arrayed against change can be both subtle and powerful, so you must hold the line. If people try to follow your lead but are made to suffer for their courage they will never trust you or the organisation again.”



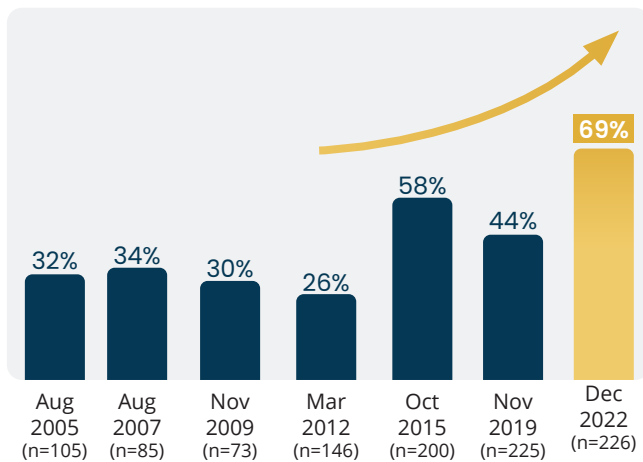
On balance, is CHS a “truly great place to work?”

Q. One of our signature questions on the BPA Survey is the Truly Great Place to Work. It is the best indicator of solidarity and camaraderie.

ACT Pathology’s Truly Great Rating increased by 25% from a low of 44% of respondents answering YES (pre COVID in 2019) to 69% answering YES in December 2022.

That’s a pretty spectacular outcome.

Glenn, any tips to share for others on how you went about increasing the Truly Great rating?



Some comments from ACT Pathology respondents

“It really is the people I work with that makes CHS a great place to work. Everyone helps everyone out and it makes it a friendly place to be.”

“I really enjoy working for CHS, particularly Pathology. It is an encouraging place to work!”

A. “Interesting question Jacqui. As with many organisations we have various departments – with team members doing great technical work within their local teams. But these teams were heavily siloed, with very little cross-organisational collaboration. And actually, some of these teams already felt they had great camaraderie. Some of these folks were confused initially by the BPA survey data - “but we already get along really well!”

But the survey data don’t lie – this team was in the Blame engagement cycle. And this local camaraderie was just that - contained solely within their own silo, and at the same time feeling great distrust of others and especially of senior leadership.

These days that siloed approach presents a huge risk – we need to work together as one “Team Pathology” if we are to meet the challenges of this increasingly complex world.

So, we did a few things. We brought the senior leadership group together, both at work and in off-site workshops, with the initial aim of getting people working together with a common cause. And helping them understand their own responsibilities as leaders as part of one Team Pathology.

We also did some hard work to provide role clarity for leaders. There had been significant blurring of role definitions over the years, which caused some leaders to feel frustrated and disempowered and withdrawn. I should note there is often a power imbalance responsible for this state of affairs. And challenging power requires

resolve and persistence. I made sure I had good open comms with my Executive and found myself a great professional coach.

We also ramped up communication to the whole Pathology team – showing people that we share common goals and aspirations and responsibilities. And seeking everyone’s input and energy to meet these goals.

And at the same time our messaging reminded people that we are in turn part of one broader Team CHS (again – strong messaging from the CEO vital here).

We established a team of Culture Champions – inviting interested team members from across ACT Pathology to meet together to chat about culture and to share tips and stories. Getting folks in a room, leaving titles and seniority at the door and letting them share with an equal voice. Having the “head honcho” in the room might have felt a bit intimidating for some at first – but it was great to see those barriers fall away and people quickly came to feel it is a safe space.

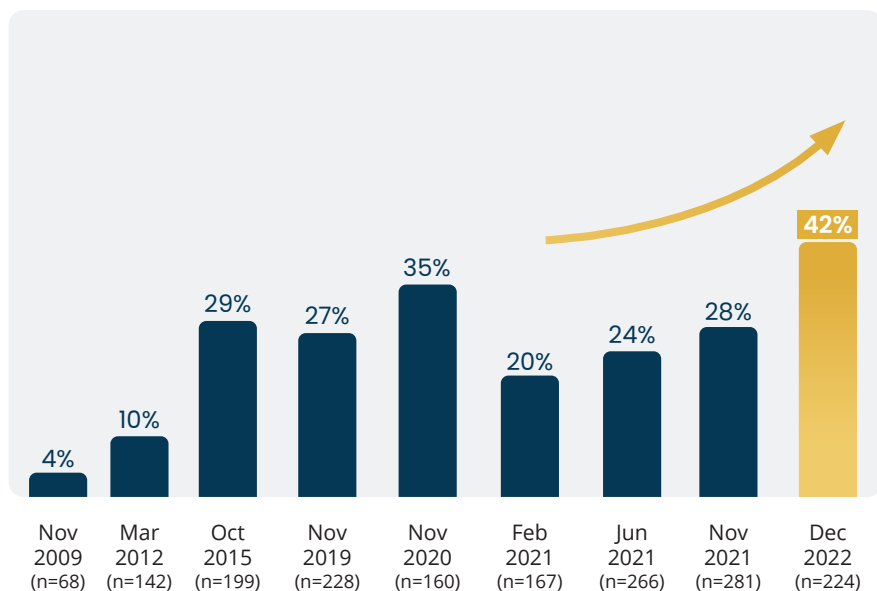
It has been great to watch how the senior leaders have responded to all of this. For example, some have taken their own initiative to spend more time walking around and checking in with other teams – just for a chat. This has really helped people feel connected and respected – and part of one Team Pathology. In my leadership role, it has been really heartening to see my senior team taking on this responsibility and walking the talk themselves. Great signs for the future, I reckon.”

There is **high trust** in the Executive Management Team of CHS.

Q. I always say, ‘trust is the glue that binds an organisation together’ and that ‘you will never achieve cultural change without building trust’.

The level of Trust in the CHS Executive Team as perceived by your people in ACT Pathology Services increased from a low of 28% to 42% agreeing in the December 2022 survey (an increase of 14%).

Ok, tell me how you achieved this outcome Glenn?



A. “By being genuine in our messaging, and following through. For example, when I arrived it was clear that there were pockets of poor behaviour that had not been addressed. I called this out early and made it clear we were drawing a line in the sand on behaviour. Naturally people are skeptical at first (they have seen bosses come and go). But we delivered, and several people left the organisation. As a consequence the workplace felt safer and more respectful, and people came to trust that the messaging is genuine.

Again, the CHS CEO set a clear example. There has been very clear messaging that people who are not prepared to live the CHS values do not belong here, and we have seen poor performers leave from other parts of CHS. I can't overemphasise the importance of this unequivocal messaging from the Executive.

And also just showing people that I am human, as silly as that may sound. Having a “Dr” in front of my name, on top of the seniority of the Executive Director role, creates a massive barrier with people. I have never been comfortable with that. We are all people, with our own life

Message to Dave Peffer



Dave Peffer
Chief Executive Officer
Canberra Health Service



Thanks for all your amazing effort and hard work to help improve things at CHS.

Having left TCH for a few years and now returned, it feels like the winds of change are here and that things are improving across the board. The new software program in pathology (bringing us out of the 90's at last) helps a lot!!



This message is from the 2022 CHS Pulse Survey from an ACT Pathology respondent.

journeys. Connecting with these amazing people here is one of the true joys of work for me. But it takes time and effort before people will let their guard down. So I try to take time to chat to people, and show a genuine interest in their lives. And showing them my own human flaws (of which there are many!) The experts in leadership talk about showing vulnerability to build trust. They are worth a read eg Patrick Lencioni, Simon Sinek and others.

I also talk to our team members about leaders needing support. That might sound a bit contradictory. But leaders are human too. We often have people stepping up into leadership roles, and I ask everyone to consider that as leaders we are all on learning journeys. We all make mistakes. And leaders have a huge amount to learn from their own team members. I hope this helps leaders seem more human, and removes some of the barriers. And takes some of the pressure off, where before leaders were expected to be all-knowing and infallible, controlling and directing. The days of the omnipotent boss – the head honcho – thankfully are gone!”

Q. I am sure others would like to know Glenn, whether you have observed any other demonstrable outcomes/metrics, as you have improved the organisational culture of the department/service – any noticeable changes in other metrics such as sick leave, people turnover, productivity metrics (I realise the kind of work your people do would have quantifiable metrics?).

A. “Great question – and a little tricky to answer. With COVID and our huge IT project, these are far from normal times. We have seen wild swings in activity (remember -we do the PCR testing!) and our own teams have been impacted by COVID themselves. So it is almost impossible to confidently unpack causation from the changes we have seen eg sick leave, turnover etc.

Despite that I am convinced that I see these positive outcomes all around, every day. And in all quarters - project delivery, customer service, productivity, etc.”



Q. Glenn, you reached out to the Workforce Culture and Leadership Team in CHS to help you work on the culture of the Pathology Service. Can you tell me a little bit more about that and the support you received from the OD Team.



Flavia D'Ambrosio and Renate Triffitt
Workforce Culture and Leadership
Canberra Health Services

A. “Well, when I arrived here it soon became apparent that there was much work to be done. And I needed all the help that I could get. Getting the experts from OD involved was a no-brainer.

Flavia D'Ambrosio and her team have been phenomenal. They helped in several ways. Firstly their experience and knowledge helped me understand the survey itself, and of course the history of what had been tried here before I arrived.

Flavia and Renate Triffitt were already well respected by the team here, and they lent credibility to my messaging and the program of work.

They worked with the teams on leadership skills development (eg HBDI, 360s etc) and did targeted interventions where local leaders sought their help.

They supported our leadership workshop program, working together with me and our external facilitator.

Renate joined in the Culture Champions and was a super helpful reference point for them. She is loved, and really helps people feel safe.

And, critically, Flavia joined in with me a series of 1-on-1 meetings with team leaders and their clinical directors (OK, it was 2-on-2!). We made each team leader accountable for their local culture action plan, and they were asked to present their plans to me and Flavia. These sessions were fantastic. There was both encouragement and constructive challenge, and Flavia and I worked as a great team.

We are indebted to both of them.

(Oh, and the team at BPA have been awesome too. I have learned so much from you, including some penny-dropping moments such as when I read about Manager Disconnect!”

Q. Glenn, if there was one piece of advice you would give to other leaders who have a tough gig trying to bring about the necessary cultural change in their health service (particularly public health services like you!) what would it be? (this is you Glenn sending a Message in a Bottle to other leaders!!)

A. "OK, this is going to be a very honest answer. My advice is – ask yourself two questions.

7

Are you prepared to make this your TOP priority And prepared to strap in for a hard journey?

2

Do you have the support you need?

You will almost certainly have to deal with power structures and effect some change that will be heavily resisted. Rock solid support from the Executive is vital.

If you can't answer Yes to both of these, I suggest you think very hard about whether this is the right journey for you.

If you can answer Yes to both, but still feel stuck – get help. Find the people who can support you, who truly understand the drivers of culture, and get them involved.

And let's have a chat. I'm happy to share what we have done. And I'm always keen to learn from you and your journey."

Last words from Glenn about a gem ...



Flavia, Glenn and that's Mary on the right

A. "I would like to share a gem who goes by the name of Mary.

Shortly after I arrived, we needed to find a team leader for our most troubled team (so troubled they had their own external review of culture in recent times). Over the 15 yr history of the BPA Culture survey, this team had never been out of Blame or Blame+. It was a tough neighbourhood, riven by conflict at all levels.

Now, these leadership roles in the past have always been assigned to the most senior technical expert in the team. But this time we took a different course. I asked Mary, a senior member of the ACT Pathology team, to take on the role. Mary is an accomplished laboratory leader – but she is NOT an expert in the technical work of this team. She was appointed with a clear mandate to provide

mature and values-driven leadership, to help the team heal and, hopefully, to start to turn around the workplace culture. This approach to appointing leaders was unheard of in this organisation. It caused more than a few ripples. But Mary quietly set about her task, with her usual compassion and care for people, and sensible and fair approach.

At 6 months, the BPA survey showed team engagement had lifted out of Blame and into Reaction for the first time. At first we were all worried it might be a temporary blip. And yet after a further 12 months, engagement has soared. The team has leapfrogged right over Consolidation, and is now in Ambition.

It is a simply stunning result. And it proves overwhelmingly the critical importance of prioritising values-based leadership above all else. It shows that, despite years of an oppressive Blame culture, people remain hungry for change. And they will support and respond to values-based leadership when they see it, and know they can trust it. And it can change quickly.

And you can feel it. Walking through Mary's lab area now, and chatting to the team, the positivity and energy is palpable.

The team knows that Mary is moving on soon. They are sad, of course. And there is some concern that the culture will slip backwards. But we talked about this as a team. And we all agreed that we aren't going to let go of these hard-won gains. We will all fight to keep what we built together. I have given that commitment to them in my ED role. And they tell me they are going to bottle the Mary Magic. From now on, the culture in this team no longer hangs only on the sole occupant of a single leadership role. It is on all of them, and all of us. They have agreed – we are all leaders, in our way, and we are holding on to the Mary Magic together."

Lesson: Recruit on values, every time.



A message from the Workforce Culture and Leadership team at CHS

Q. Flavia – what is one thing (or more!) that stands out in your mind in your working with the entire team at ACT Pathology in bringing about this Cultural Change?



ACT Pathology Leadership Day

A. “ACT Pathology is a perfect example of the impact the Executive and senior leadership team have on organisational culture!

There must be a collective commitment to improving culture, where senior leaders are on the same page on the type of workplace environment they want to experience and just as importantly want their staff to experience and it’s not just the responsibility of the Executive or ‘head honcho’.

And very often to have that collective commitment, senior leaders need to be open to doing things differently, genuinely seek feedback from their team members, recognise and acknowledge that they may require leadership development that enables staff engagement, positive, collaborative, and safe working environments.”

Q. And do you have any tips for what your team will offer in the future to make sure the cultural change in ACT Pathology is sustained?

A. “We will continue to work with the Executive and Senior Leadership Group to keep culture on their collective radar, and the frequency with which we conduct workplace culture and pulse surveys provides the impetus for keeping us all accountable.”



Congrats! | BPA congratulates Glenn Edwards and the team of ACT Pathology Services on their achievements in bringing about Cultural Change.