The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series
“Core Values Create Culture”
May 2, 2016

Vince Burens

Al Lopus: Hello, I’m Al Lopus, and thanks for joining us today. We all know that a good workplace culture is defined by a set of guiding core values, but how do we take those values off the page and into actions of every leader and employee? When an organization clearly defines its core values and then lives them out, it creates a ripple effect throughout all corners of the organization, and the results are revolutionary. Our guest today is Vince Burens, president and CEO of Coalition for Christian Outreach.

From its inception in 1971, CCO has been transforming college students to transform the world. Today CCO is serving on 115 college campuses in 12 eastern states and the District of Columbia. When this interview was recorded, Vince served as the vice president of staff services. He has since been promoted several times. He walks us through their intensive process of creating CCO’s core values, successful strategies for helping these values come alive in the organization, and the positive effects they have as a result. Let’s go to the interview.

So Vince, our topic today is to talk about the core values of the CCO. Tell me a little bit, from your perspective of where you were in the organization, about how CCOs core values were established.

Vince Burens: Our core values were established nine years ago, and at that time I was a campus staff. I was working at Robert Morris. At the time it was Robert Morris College. It’s now Robert Morris University. What we did as an organization is our president, Dan Dupee, brought together a group of some younger staff and some more veteran staff and pulled together a team with the idea of analyzing our organization, talking to some of our donors, alums, and obviously, most importantly, our current staff, and trying to get a sense of who the CCO was, who it has been, and who it’s going to be, and establishing a set of values that could really articulate clearly and succinctly who we are.

Al: So as a campus staff person, you would hear about what these values were. How did that relate to you?
Vince: Well, it was about a year-and-a-half process. The team was very thorough. As a campus staff person, what I appreciated was the level of engagement I was able to have in the process. I was only on staff at that point for one year, so I was very green in doing campus ministry and working for the CCO. What it meant to me to be included in the process and once the values were brought out was it made explicit what was implicit.

In other words, we kind of knew what we were about. We knew implicitly these things were a high priority for us, but it was nice to be able to have five phrases, five succinct pieces that I was able to succinctly and clearly explain to others who we were and what we were about, and also in my day-to-day activities on campus, knowing what I was about and wasn’t about was just, for me, much more helpful.

Al: That’s kind of remarkable, that there you were, a first-year on-campus staff person, and you felt like you were involved in the process. How were you involved?

Vince: In two ways. First, I was interviewed by a member of the team who was working on the core values project. They asked me a series of questions in two different categories. One was what was important to me, what my values were, what I understood to be good campus ministry, what I understood the CCO to be doing. So one series of questions was about me.

The other series was more about the CCO. What did I understand the CCOs values to be? Where did I see the CCO headed? What did I understand to be the history of the CCO? What did I understand the purpose and focus of our ministry was? It was flattering to be involved at that level as someone who had only been on campus for one year, but I was very engaged with it and ultimately had a high sense of buy-in when they were announced.

Al: That’s fantastic. Do you remember when they were ultimately communicated? How did that come about?

Vince: They were communicated at one of our staff training events. We call them staff seminars. We get together as an entire staff four times a year at two-day events. Dan had dedicated an entire staff seminar to the unveiling of these events, to a question and answer time around how the team had narrowed it down to those five points, and also giving us an opportunity to think through how this would impact our ministry and processing, in supervision, what that would look like on campus... It was really a two-day event that had different pieces involved to show the priority level that was going to be placed on these core values.

Al: As you were talking with others as that two-day event was going on, what was the communication going on in conversations?

Vince: Well, I think it was a mixture of excitement. It was satisfaction that they were able to, like I said earlier, make explicit what was always implicit. Always some concern. “What is this going to mean to me? Am I going to have to do things differently?” Some minor conversations of wishing maybe this was included or that was included, different little pieces.
I think the overall theme of conversation was excitement, kind of wondering what this meant for the future, because this was obviously a very big-picture, pie-in-the-sky kind of a thing. So what does this mean to me as I’m on campus meeting with students? People were excited about the language that was used but also looking for the operational as well. “What is this going to translate into when I’m on campus?”

**Al:** And your own personal reaction... How did you look at these core values for the CCO, and did you go through a process where you aligned them with your own values as an individual?

**Vince:** I did. I greatly appreciated having these articulated for me. You know, it was my place in life as well. As someone who was on campus only for one year at that point... You know, you’re sort of swimming a little bit. You’re trying to figure out, “Where am I going? Where am I headed? What should this look like?” So it was very helpful for me to have these five tangible points to say, “My ministry needs to reflect this.”

In turn, as I was thinking about creating events, meeting with students, meeting with administrators on campus, my perspective was always shaped... The lens through which I saw things was these core values. It was always helpful to me to understand what I should be saying yes to and what I should be saying no to based off of these core values.

**Al:** Can you give me an example using one of the core values and how that touched you at the time?

**Vince:** Sure. This may seem sort of simplistic, but one of our core values is “We love college students.” You would hope that would be the case for a campus ministry organization, but what really was helpful to me in that is that when you’re on campus initially and you’re trying to figure out what... I was on a campus at Robert Morris where really nothing was going on from a campus ministry standpoint before I got there.

So I was in the process of trying to develop a fellowship and run Bible studies and meet administrators and trying to do all of those things. What was helpful to me is that because we actually articulated we loved college students, it really gave me the freedom to not feel like, “Okay, well, I have to have a program that’s going to have 50 students attending weekly right away.” It’s not just going to be all churning out numbers on the front.

Obviously, numbers are important. We wanted to reach as many students as we possibly could on campus, but it really gave me the freedom to feel like, “Hey, I am doing my job when I’m in the cafeteria on a Wednesday afternoon just meeting with students. This organization says they have a value that we love college students, so I’m allowed to just love students.” Now that didn’t give me a license to not be strategic, but it did give me an opportunity to say, “Hey, this is going to be a process, and in the midst of that process I can just be loving college students.”

**Al:** That’s a great example, Vince. Tell me your title again?

**Vince:** Vice president of staff services.
Al: So you’re in charge of recruiting and many other things. How do you use these core values in the recruiting process?

Vince: When these core values were brought forward, one of the people Dan actually brought onto the team who articulated them was the person who was in charge of our recruiting process at the time, a gentleman named Roger Johnson. Dan did that strategically. He obviously valued Roger’s work, but he did that strategically in that he wanted whatever we were to articulate to impact the people we were bringing into the organization.

We have an application process. If someone is interested in working for us they need to fill out an application, and then they go through an interview. The application is completely focused around these core values. Every question we would ask about someone’s motivations, their past experiences, what they could envision doing and being on a campus, were all shaped around our core values.

Then in turn we train our interviewers... We have about 25 people on staff who do the interviews for prospective staff candidates, and that training process is all around figuring out a process to ask questions that will extract whether or not this person is a fit for us. So to answer your question about how we recruit, if someone is not a match with our core values, no matter how motivated and energized they are about working for the CCO, we would not hire that person.

Al: Do you have any examples off the top of your head of where that came about, where you saw that, where somebody was maybe excited about doing campus ministry but didn’t fit with the CCO values?

Vince: An example off the top of my head is one of our core values is “Faithfulness is pursued together.” One of the strong values of our organization is that we have a sense of community and connectedness with one another. We don’t think good campus ministry happens in a vacuum, that you just go onto your campus and do your thing and have no connection with the outside world.

I can remember a very strong candidate from a large state university when I was our director of recruiting. This person was highly motivated and had very good experiences coming out of college, had been part of a very large campus ministry, but was very set on not going through our training program, not necessarily being connected with other... For our first-year staff, we have something called training teams, “T teams,” where you meet with other first-year staff once a month and work through the things you work through when you’re on campus in your first year.

This person was not very interested in doing a lot of those things. Sort of felt like they knew what they were doing. Didn’t really want to be influential with other people. Just kind of wanted to do what they wanted to do. We had to make the hard decision at that point of saying, “Well, while we think you could do great campus ministry, this probably is not a great fit for who we are and what we’re about.”

Al: That’s a remarkable example. I know the CCO, as much as I’ve been around it, is a community effort. You do pursue faithfulness together. There’s no question. How else do these core values show themselves in your organization? Where else do you talk about them with your staff?
**Vince:** They’ve worked their way into every aspect of our organization. It is who we are. We have a conference that, Al, I know you’re aware of: Jubilee. The first core value is “All things belong to God,” and that’s really the focus of the conference. It’s not just your Sunday mornings that belong to God, but it is every aspect of your life: your vocation, your family, your finances. Everything you would do belongs to God, and that’s the focus of the major conference we run as an organization.

It works its way into our training program, which I mentioned a little bit earlier. We train to this end. These are the kinds of staff people we’re looking to develop, who would value what we value as an organization. I would say those are probably the two primary examples, and a third I could think of would be in the way we supervise.

Our supervisors have come up with a tool they put together about three years ago. It’s a supervision tool to help our staff people be strategic about what they’re doing on campus, to think about what is and can happen on a campus, and also managing the day-to-day, “Here’s what I need to do to be successful to get to those things.” That tool is really shaped around our core values.

**Al:** So that would be a performance management tool of some sort?

**Vince:** It is, yes.

**Al:** Great. You’re also involved in promotion decisions as well, aren’t you, Vince?

**Vince:** I am at times, yes.

**Al:** Of course, to get into a position for promotion, I’m sure the core values are reviewed again.

**Vince:** They are, absolutely. We want to communicate to the primary recipients of the marketing and promotion of our organization, our donors, our students on campus, and the churches and colleges and other organizations with which we partner, and we want to be very clear to those primary recipients of the promotion, “This is who we are. This is what we’re about.”

We really feel like God has given us a certain vision and focus for ministry, and we want to be clear with people on that. We would love to engage as many people in that mission as possible, but we also don’t want to try to bring people into the organization or we wouldn’t want donors to think they’re giving to something they’re really not giving to, so we really want to be clear with people. That’s the reason why these values will come out. We want to make explicit who we are and what we’re about.

**Al:** Bottom line, how do you feel these values contribute to the effectiveness of the CCO? You have a very effective ministry, very high employee/staff satisfaction and commitment scores on the employee survey. How do you feel like the values contribute to the effectiveness of the ministry overall?

**Vince:** I think they contribute very directly. As we mentioned earlier, the recruiting process... The people we bring into the organization are people who, on the front end, know what our values are and have articulated to us that these are things they value as well, so you know you have like-minded people coming into the organization. The way we supervise and train, the endgame is these values.
It has really allowed us to be very clear about who we are, what we’re trying to achieve, and what the culture of our organization is. So I think people’s satisfaction with working for the CCO, a lot of it has to do with these values, because people know what they’re signing up for. They know what they’re becoming a part of. They know who they’re working for. I think the satisfaction is directly connected to it, because it’s clear and it’s understood on the front.

**AI:** Any other thoughts from your standpoint on the core values of the CCO and their application?

**Vince:** No, other than to say I’m very grateful for Dan’s leadership, our president, in deciding to do this. It was a long process, like I mentioned. It was about a year to a year-and-a-half process to really do it well, and I think in the midst of it there were times where staff and administration alike were sort of wondering, “Okay, where is this going? Where is this headed? Are we ever going to get there?” But once we did get there, it’s something that has been substantial and something that I think is going to stand the test of time because we took so much time to do it well. That to me is the biggest piece.

**AI:** They’ve been in place for six years probably and still very fresh and robust in the organization, aren’t they?

**Vince:** They are, very much so.

**AI:** I’m curious. You don’t have a lot of definition behind these values. Some other organizations do. Do you have a reaction to that?

**Vince:** Well, we did actually. When the core values were presented, there was actually about a page description connected to each one of these core values that different staff members who were part of the team read aloud and that, at the time, we all as staff familiarized ourselves with. The interesting thing about putting definitions, as we found anyway… I’d be curious to see other people’s core values and their definition behind them.

While the core values themselves stand the test of time and continue on to be true, at least we tended to, and when I’ve read some other people’s articulation of their values… They tend to be a kind of momentary articulation of the value. So I think for us, when these were written seven to nine years ago, we found that as we’ve continued to look at the breakouts of the core values, they were written for that specific period of time.

It’s interesting that you bring that up. We have a strategy team within our organization that has brought together campus staff and administrators to be forward-thinking about the future strategy of campus ministry in our organization. They haven’t started working on it yet, but one of the projects on the table is, in the next year or two, to write a current articulation of the breakout of each of these core values. It won’t affect the core value itself, but more of a current, “This is what this core value means to us in the current state of the CCO.”

**AI:** That’s very interesting. So you started off with these phrases, and they had more description behind them, but the phrases are what stood the test of time. The descriptions seem to be changing over time.
**Vince:** Right. There are large chunks of those descriptions that still hold very true, but I think we’ve just found it... We’re in the process of trying to articulate what they mean for us today as well.

**Al:** Well, one last thing. You have an interesting Big Hairy Audacious Goal. In 25 years, the CCO will be 2,500 exceptional staff in thriving partnerships transforming a generation of college students.

**Vince:** There you go. You’ve got it.

**Al:** So Vince, tell me about this process, when you developed this BHAG.

**Vince:** Sure. Again, Dan assembled a team. This team was our strategy team, which I mentioned earlier. Dan gave us the assignment of doing the work of setting a 25-year Big Hairy Audacious Goal, if you’re familiar with Jim Collins’ work, *Good to Great* and some of his other strategic development work. That’s where the term *BHAG* comes from. It’s Jim Collins’ term.

We went through this process of trying to sort out, “Where is the CCO headed in the next 25 years?” Collins gives you three questions to answer: “What can you be the best in the world at, what is your organization most passionate about, and what is your resource engine?” For for-profit entities he says, “What’s your economic engine?” For nonprofit entities he says, “What’s your resource engine?”

We went through a process of answering those three questions, and that was another process where we engaged our entire staff, alums, people who knew our organization well. We went all over the community, people who had spoken at our conferences and had been involved in our events over the years. After a year, we came up with this BHAG.

We realized that our resource engine was our staff people. Our staff people are the CCO. So when we looked at, “Well, should we try to be on every campus in our region? Should we be on every campus in the US? Should we be international?” When we looked at all of those issues, what we kept coming back to and what the data was telling us is it’s really all about your people. It’s not about so much where you go. Your staff people pick you where you go. That’s why the goal is driven around staff.

**Al:** How many interviews would you say you actually had with your staff and with all of these organizations?

**Vince:** Oh gosh. Well, we have about 200 staff people, so each staff person was interviewed. I would say we interviewed probably about 50 to 75 donors. We interviewed pastors and administrators of colleges and universities who have CCO staff people working for them. We probably did about 30 of those interviews. We interviewed other, you know, if you want to put them in other concerned citizens, alums and people who have been involved in our organization. We probably interviewed maybe another 50 to 70 of those. A lot of interviews. Very time intensive.

**Al:** Who was doing the interviews? Your strategy team was doing the interviews?

**Vince:** That’s correct. There were seven people on the strategy team who were conducting the interviews.
Al: Fantastic. And it was a year-long process. So continue the process. You did the interviews. You came together as a team. You synthesized the data, and you realized it was all about your staff more than anything else. Tell me about the rest of it.

Vince: Well, to answer the questions, what we were most passionate about was transformation, and what we could be best in the world at we felt like was partnership. That’s kind of our unique niche in the campus ministry community. So when you took transformation, partnership, and staff as your three answers to those questions, then we went through a refining process. How do you articulate a goal where the three primary components are partnership, transformation, and staff?

That took us about six months of refining and bouncing it off multiple people who were engaged in the process. We actually brought in two outside consultants along the way who had done some of this work, who were kind of friends of the CCO who were nearby, and they helped us to continue to refine and articulate what would make the most sense.

Al: I think I can say that six years ago the CCO wasn’t sure it really wanted to grow, and now you’re saying you want to go from 200 staff to 2,500 exceptional staff in the next 25 years. That certainly indicates a different culture in a sense of wanting to grow pretty substantially.

Vince: It does just a bit, doesn’t it?

Al: Yeah. So when you rolled this out, how did you do it, and what was people’s reaction to it?

Vince: It was a similar process to the core value articulation and unveiling that we talked about earlier. We did it at one of our staff seminars, a two-day training event. Again, because we had engaged our staff people along the way, there wasn’t a high… I think maybe the number 2,500, there was some shock value with that, which if you read the Collins material, he does say it should be something that pushes you, stretches you, takes your breath away.

It shouldn’t be something that you look at and say, “Oh yeah, that’s no problem. We can do that. No worries. Don’t need to change a thing.” So I think the number was a little shocking to people. We came up with a number… A healthy growth model that we had kind of researched and were given was about 10 percent growth a year, and if you extrapolate out the numbers, in 25 years at a 10 percent growth rate it’ll put us right around 2,500.

So there was some concern, but I think our culture really has changed a great deal over the past seven to ten years under Dan’s leadership. Again, with articulating the mission, the vision, the core values, it has really helped people understand in order for the CCO to be faithful to what God has called it to be… It’s about being about transformation in the lives of college students and reaching as many college students as you can, and the only way you can do that is by hiring more people to be on more college campuses. So I think that has become much more of our culture during Dan’s leadership.

Al: Yeah, certainly in line with your values of loving college students and knowing that transformation, of course, comes because of your other value, that Jesus changes people’s lives.
**Vince:** Exactly.

**Al:** So how is that existing in your organization, this BHAG? How do you talk about that, and what’s the level of focus on that?

**Vince:** I would say from an organizational standpoint, our focus on it is very high. Obviously, when you set a 25-year goal, it’s very difficult for our average campus staff person to wake up every morning and say, “Okay, I’m setting a strategy to be somewhere 25 years from now.” That would be hard for anyone to do in their regular life.

What we’ve done to make it much more tangible (and Collins suggests this in his materials) is setting base camps, three- to five-year goals that if you would achieve them would help you move toward the BHAG. So we’re in the process. We’ve articulated three base camps we’re moving toward that have to do with training, position development, and what we’ve called invitation, inviting our students to our larger conferences and events, inviting them to consider applying for the CCO, those kinds of things.

We’re also in the process, thanks to your help...This Thursday and Friday, we’re going to do a time of appreciative inquiry with all of our staff and begin to engage them on what’s another base camp we should set for three to five years into the future, kind of dreaming about who we could be, what we could be. So we’re going to do that. We have a team of people (we call them the Al team, the appreciative inquiry team) who are going to be using the process of appreciative inquiry to help us set another base camp to keep the BHAG on the front burner.

**Al:** That was a very positive experience last summer, where your leadership team sat around and dreamed about what the CCO would look like in 25 years.

**Vince:** Right. That was very helpful.

**Al:** Yeah, a great process. Well, that is very exciting news, Vince, and a very interesting process to get to a very forward-looking and Big Hairy Audacious Goal, that’s for sure. Okay, well, this has been very helpful, Vince. I appreciate it.

**Vince:** Thank you, Al. Appreciate it.

**Al:** To our listeners, if you enjoyed today’s episode, you can find the transcripts on blog.bcwinstitute.org. We’d love to hear your feedback about our interview today, so please take a minute to leave a comment on our blog post or reach out on social media, @BCWInstitute. Also do us a favor before you go. Would you please click over to iTunes to rate this program? It makes a big difference for getting this material into the hands of the right people. We would be so grateful.

Well, my friends, remember: your leadership is a gift, so let’s work together to be sure that Christian organizations set the standard as the best, most effective places to work in the world. We’ll see you next time on the Flourishing Culture Podcast.