



The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series
“Developing Top Leaders with 360 Reviews”
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Todd Hubers

Al Lopus: Hello! I’m Al Lopus, and thanks for joining us today.

Leaders often ask themselves, “How can I improve my performance and the performance of my top leadership team?” Several studies indicate the use of 360-degree feedback helps improve performance because it provides not just one perspective of a supervisor but rather multiple perspectives needed to identify a leader’s strengths and areas to improve.

Of course, both are needed to increase a leader’s performance. So no wonder there is universal agreement that 360-degree feedback is far more credible and valid than a single-rater system. Several years ago, we developed a competency-based 360 for Christian leaders. “Why?” you might ask. Well, because our engagement research proves that Christian leaders and the Christian character of leaders are a key element in employee engagement and productivity in faith-based organizations.

Our guest today knows how true this can be for leaders and their organizations alike. As a leader in one of the best-known Christian colleges in the United States, he has leveraged the benefits of the 360 for his leadership team. Here to talk with us about 360-degree feedback is Todd Hubers, the vice president of people, strategy, and technology and a member of the president’s cabinet at Calvin College. Hi, Todd, and welcome to our podcast today.

Todd Hubers: Thank you, Al. It’s a pleasure to join you today.

Al: Tell us a bit about yourself and your work at Calvin College.

Todd: Well, Al, I started at Calvin back in the mid-90s after about 10 years in public higher education, so I have been here for the last 20 years or so and just have started in a new role as vice president for people, strategy, and technology in July of 2015 after a leadership role in our HR organization at the college for the 10 years prior to that.

AI: Great! Todd, what are some of the factors that led to Calvin College deciding to implement the 360-degree for your top leadership team?

Todd: Well, our strategic plan set aside one of our goals, kind of our strategic objectives, as creating a thriving workplace culture at the college. We've been using the Best Christian Workplace tools to monitor how we're doing in that area and believe creating that culture requires leaders who work together in alignment with the mission and with the strategic plan.

To help develop those leaders, we wanted a broad development tool, kind of like you described in your introduction, one that provided multiple perspectives. We wanted tools where we could get feedback not only from the supervisor and from the employee but also from team members and direct reports and other colleagues, both in terms of their areas of development, not only in their competence but also in their character and in their chemistry on teams.

A lot of tools focus heavily on the competence measure, but we really believe the character and chemistry are critical to both individual success of leaders and also organizational success. We've found BCW's 360 really aligns with what we were trying to accomplish with our leaders.

AI: Yeah. Great! Tell us a little bit about your review of the competency model when you started to investigate this. How did you customize it for Calvin, ultimately?

Todd: Well, when we were looking at the BCW 360 and what we were trying to accomplish in terms of the leadership development and workplace culture, it really was a natural fit for us. The only area of the model we felt needed further development was in competence around diversity and inclusion and cultural competence.

This is one of the key themes in our strategic plan, and we wanted to help our leaders grow in this area as well. When we discussed this with you and the desire to incorporate this into the 360, you were very accommodating in adding the diversity inclusion and the cultural competence items to the assessment. Then we really felt like we had everything we wanted to measure.

AI: Yeah, and that diversity competence is clearly important in a Christian university setting, that's for sure! When we looked at this, what were three or four of the key elements that were part of the implementation and the communication phase of the project?

Todd: Well, the first step was really to get the support of the president and the executive leadership team. That was, in our situation, relatively easy given that it was a strategic plan initiative, and it was really a shared commitment of the leadership team to performance management and developing our leaders across the college.

The second step was to really work with the staff at the Best Christian Workplaces to set up the process. You know, who was it we were going to review? Who were the supervisors? Who were those doing the reviewing? Then what would a communication plan look like?

Then the third step was really communicating with those who were participating in the review process to make sure they understood the goals of the process, what we were trying to accomplish and what we were asking them to do, and then it was just a matter of executing on the plan. The whole process was pretty easy and straightforward.

We received a lot of positive feedback from participants that the process, which was much better... I mean, it was easier. It was more secure and provided more relevant feedback than other 360 processes we had used in the past. It really was pretty straightforward.

Al: Had you been doing some of your own 360s internally in the past?

Todd: We had done internal 360s, kind of modeled on our faculty review process.

Al: Yeah, right. Once the 360 was completed by the raters and you received the reports, what was the process from there?

Todd: Well, we're only in the second year of the process. We did it for the first time last year, and each year it's been a little bit different. In the first year, we did the survey for our executive leadership team (our president's cabinet, those who reported directly to the president). Everything funneled really through the president.

This year we're doing it with our traditional leadership teams, so each executive who is a member of the cabinet and had a 360 last year is now doing 360s with members of their leadership teams. As we move forward, we're planning to get all leaders across the college on a three- to four-year cycle so they're getting this broad feedback or this feedback from multiple perspectives on a regular basis.

The way the implementation process looks on our end is we really coordinate through our Human Resources office as the central spot of communication. Once the results come in they go from our Human Resources director to each of the supervisors, and then the supervisors incorporate those into the performance development plans for each of the leaders who are being reviewed.

The full package of information each employee gets includes a review of their accomplishments, a review of the 360 results, and a plan for development and goal setting for the next year. Then each of the vice presidents can work with the HR director or with myself either on an action plan or a development plan for each of their leaders.

Al: Do you have a plan for reviewing the 360 then again, doing another one in the future?

Todd: Well, we would like each leader to have one every three or four years. I think we're trying to figure out really from a budgeting perspective and, as we get into this, what frequency makes the most sense and how often it would be. Our president is on a four-year rotation with the board, so we're kind of leaning toward that, but I can see us doing it every three to four years. I think the action plans will build in mid-year checkpoints, annual checkpoints. The development plans themselves will be monitored on a much more regular basis.

Al: Right, right. Well, I bet you have a favorite story of how the 360 took hold and began to make a difference among your leadership team. Does one come to mind?

Todd: As I mentioned earlier, we're just kind of starting with the process, so I don't have a lot of stories from our cabinet, but I can give you one from my own experience. That is, one thing I learned in my 360 review (I've been working in higher education for 30 years, and this was the first 360 I had ever had) was really it was in the chemistry area. I learned I focus much more on competence than on the chemistry aspect. That is, particularly in developing and coaching teams.

I have always seen myself as resourcing teams, you know, trying to equip them with what they need but not necessarily developing teams. One of those things that came through in the feedback, particularly from direct reports and from some other colleagues too, was just some encouragement to work in the area of developing, coaching, mentoring those on my teams. That's really something I worked with the president then to develop a plan to help implement that with this new division now that I'm leading. It's been invaluable in our work together in this first year.

Al: Oh, that's great. That's a great story. Thanks for sharing, Todd.

Todd: You're welcome!

Al: You mentioned the action planning process. Tell us a little bit about that.

Todd: Just like we do on the goal side in setting goals in terms of specific things, outcomes we're looking to achieve related to the strategic plan and our action planning as it relates to the 360, we're also looking at not just the competence and the execution but also on the team building side of things in terms of the chemistry piece and the character. So things that often get (at least at Calvin they have in the past) overlooked in the review and in the development process.

An action plan really encompasses all three of those areas now. It includes things you can be working on to develop yourself in terms of your leadership to develop your team. Everybody's is going to look a little bit different depending on what strength they bring to that particular role.

Al: I'd love to have you give us a few of the significant outcomes or results from this process. What would you say would highlight or top the list?

Todd: At a high level, I'd say our performance management system now that we're doing with the 360 more closely aligns with the workplace culture we're trying to develop. I would say leaders now see their leadership effectiveness measured more broadly. It's not just competence. It's not just, "Did I hit my smart goals?" It's also character and chemistry.

Some of those smart goals actually include areas of character and chemistry, not just competence. Leaders now have much more specific feedback and action items for their development as leaders. I think we're serving our leaders and those who work on their teams much more effectively.

Al: When you look back and you look at the 360 project, what was the best part of the process or maybe even an improvement suggestion?

Todd: I would say it transformed here at Calvin a performance review process that was based in the past purely on operational results to a performance development process that still includes the operational results, but it also aligns with the goals we have for our leaders and the culture we're trying to create through them, really a culture of high trust, transparency, mutual accountability, teamwork, collaboration, learning and valuing diverse cultural backgrounds.

Those are all things we're measuring in the BCW workplace survey we're doing. Now we're also working on that with our leaders. You know, we started with our executive team, and now we're moving into our divisional leadership teams across the college. That's going to be, at Calvin, 45 to 50 leaders across the college who are going to go through this process. We believe that's going to have a significant impact on how each person leads and then ultimately on the workplace culture of the college.

Al: I know this is a bit early to maybe even ask this question, but how has the improved health of your leadership team at Calvin affected or strengthened your ultimate mission as a university?

Todd: We've been doing some other initiatives as well, but I would say this tool along with those other initiatives really has given us some shared goals and some common language for us in our work together and how we develop leaders and how we shape the workplace culture of the college.

Al: Yeah. Well thanks, Todd, and thanks for being with us today. We certainly have enjoyed what we've learned, and we're really excited to hear about this case study you have and how you're working with your leaders to develop not only their competence, as you had described, but also their character and chemistry, working with teams, working with each other, and also having a common language you're able to talk about in terms of development. That's a great outcome. I'll bet you have one final thought about 360 you'd like to leave with leaders who are listening.

Todd: Yeah, I think the final thought I would leave would be not to underestimate the strategic value of your workplace culture and the role of leadership development in creating that culture to accomplish the goals of your organization. I believe really developing strong leaders is at the root of organizational success, and I believe the BCW 360 is going to be core to that process at Calvin College. We're just very pleased with it.

Al: That's great. Well, thanks for sharing your wisdom, insights, and stories. Thank you for extending your ministry to leaders who are listening and benefiting from all you've shared with us today.

Todd: You're welcome, Al. It was a pleasure to join you and to share with you and the listeners some of the work we're doing at Calvin College.

Al: If you, our listeners, have enjoyed today's episode, you can find a transcript at blog.bcwinstitute.org. We'd love to hear your feedback about our interview today. Please take a minute and leave a comment on our blog post or reach out on social media (@BCWInstitute). Now I'm going to

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My friends, remember your leadership is a gift. Let's work together to make sure 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.