



The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series
"Outstanding Talent: Trust, Flexibility and Family First"
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Robert Bortins Jr.

Intro: Today's podcast is brought to you by BCWI's 360 leadership assessment.

Male: Welcome to the *Flourishing Culture Podcast*, where you'll learn how to build a flourishing workplace culture that drives the ministry impact of your organization, your church, or your company, brought to you by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. Now, here's your host, BCWI president, Al Lopus.

Al Lopus: Hello, and thanks for joining us again on the *Flourishing Culture Podcast*. Outstanding talent is the third of the eight culture drivers that make up BCWI's FLOURISHing model, and outstanding talent is the focus of our new ongoing series called the "Eight Ways to Build a Flourishing Workplace Culture." As a brief reminder, outstanding talent is all about an organization having highly qualified people with the necessary calling, character, competence, chemistry, and contribution that lead to the kind of high performance needed to help an organization meet their goals and make a successful mission and organizational impact. My guest well knows the importance of outstanding talent. I want to welcome Robert Bortins Jr., the president and CEO of Classical Conversations, based in Southern Pines, North Carolina. Classical Conversations is leading the home-centered education movement by teaching parents and students the classical tools of learning. Robert, I'm so glad to have you with us today. Welcome to our podcast and new ongoing series, the "Eight Ways to Build a Flourishing Workplace Culture."

Robert Bortins Jr.: Thank you for having me, Al. Excited to be on today and just thankful for the great tools that you and your team have developed at BCWI that's helped us just become a flourishing workplace culture.

Al: We're thrilled to see the progress that you've made, that's for sure. You know, Robert, for our listeners who are not very familiar with Classical Conversations, tell us what makes the organization so distinctive and what's behind your phenomenal growth.

Robert: Well, thanks, Al. We are an educational company that empowers parents. Everyone else really gives lip service to that idea. They say parents are our focus, and we need parents to be involved for being successful. But we actually put all of our resources into the parents, and that helps them to be prepared to do a great job raising their kids and homeschooling them. And then we make sure that our best customers become our employees, and we have hired and contracted around alignment first, and then we train, train, train as much as we can and using the best resources. Since we put our people first, we bend over backwards to build a positive relationship with those that we interact with.

Al: Yeah. Fantastic. Robert, we came to know each other four years ago when you started surveying with us, and you really made a priority of completing the Survey, and the Survey clearly shows your organization's culture is very healthy—in fact, now, flourishing—and you've got almost seven out of 10 of your employees who are, what we considered, engaged in work, which is really great, especially when you consider that's above the average, which is about 50% of employees are engaged, the way we defined it, Christian-led companies like yours. And, of course, no organization is perfect. This prompts me to ask, what did those first Survey results have to say about where your workplace culture was strong and maybe where you needed to improve?

Robert: Yeah, Al. The first time you take the Survey, you don't really know what to expect. And, of course, we were happy that we were certified as a Best Christian Workplace. But it also did expose areas where we weren't meeting our own expectations and really had blind spots to that fact and just around a lot of communication and just ways that we could improve and let our employees know what was going on and making sure that they were involved in that process. And so that was really what stuck out to us at that time.

Al: Yeah. And what was one of the first action steps that you took to begin to move the needle of your workplace culture from that healthy spot to even a better spot?

Robert: Well, we knew that if we were going to take this Survey, we wanted to take it seriously and show our employees that we are listening to them. And so you guys have a great tool in the lowest 10 report, and we identified four of our lowest scores. And we set up a team of supervisors, managers, and even hourly employees from across the different aspects of our organization and gave each of them one quarter to study that issue, that one question, talk to their peers, and then come up with a set of solutions to those, and then present them to the C-level team.

We didn't implement everything all the time, but we implemented what made sense, and we staggered that implementation in and just continued with that communication. And, of course, the great part for us was not only did those four scores up, but so did other related items, other questions that related to those. And, of course, we don't do the Survey to raise our score, but we hope that by listening and learning we can create an environment our team members are excited to work for because that means they'll support our customers with that same enthusiasm.

Al: Wow. So, four different teams working on one of the items that were in your bottom 10, and not only did those four go up, but several others did that were related to them. That's a great story, and it shows intentional impact, and where you work on something, you actually see the results. Yeah. That's fantastic.

Robert: Amazing.

AI: Helpful in that regard, isn't it, right?

Well, you know, what you've just shared speaks to the four pillars of outstanding talent, which are attracting, retaining, rewarding, and promoting the kind of people that you need to fulfill your mission and improve the health of the culture. Let's talk about each one of these, but let's start with attracting outstanding talent. What have you done to recruit and hire some of your most highly capable people? Numbers-wise, your staff has grown significantly in the past couple of years. What are some of the specific processes that you put in place to ensure that you're hiring only outstanding talent?

Robert: Yeah, so I think it starts with alignment, and we have a great team, and so we try to recruit from our customer base. And so I think the first thing any organization needs to do is, where is the talent that they want to recruit for alignment? And for us, we are lucky that it's our customer base, but just trying to understand where that is and then going to those people. And so we know that people that have chosen Classical Conversations for their family have alignment with our organization. We know they have a passion for education, a passion for children. And if they're our customers, they know that if they're successful here, they're going to make their own family's lives better.

We also made sure that we're reading good materials and implementing it. So one of the books we read is *Who: The A Method for Hiring*, and so we tried to implement some of those ideas into our processes. So just because you might be one of our customers does not necessarily mean that you'll be the best person to hire. And, of course, we hire outside of our customer base as well. We are wanting to make sure that they've got alignment. And if you get the right person in the seat, everyone's lives is better because hiring the wrong person, even if it expedites the process, is not going to be good for you. It's not good for the person you're hiring either. And so it's not going to be good for your organization long term. So just the term hire slowly and just make sure you're hiring the right person.

And, of course, advertising that we are a Best Christian Workplace company and saying that we're flourishing just lets people know that we'll not just talk the talk but we walk the walk.

AI: And does that help you in your recruiting process?

Robert: Yeah. It has.

AI: Your Survey results reveal that your employees believe Classical Conversations is doing a really good job of retaining your highly capable people. Our research shows that retaining highly capable people is really critical and important to building employee engagement. What approaches have you found helpful to retain your outstanding talent?

Robert: Yeah. I think trust, flexibility, allowing them to put their family first, so knowing their needs, and then just continuing to invest in them. So we trust our members, our team members, to do a good job and do it on time. And since we trust them, we can give them flexibility when appropriate to take care of life because life happens to all of us. And sitting at your desk, being distracted by what's going on at home or with a family member isn't going to be beneficial to you, it's not going to be beneficial to

them. And so if you need to go home and work, or come in late, or leave early to take care of life, then go ahead and do that. Just get your work done.

And so our employees, our team members, really appreciate our trust, and guess what? They usually give back way more than they take because they know that they can take care of what they need, and then that allows them to take care of our organization and our customers. And, of course, we are a family company and want our employees to be with their families, and so we work together to have suitable work arrangements so that they can make sure that they're hitting those life milestones with their children that they need to.

AI: Wow. Trust, flexibility, and family first. Those are three great themes or values when you talk about retention.

You know, as we talk about these four areas, the next one is about employees feeling like they're rewarded. Tell us about how some of the programs you've put in place ensure your top performers are being rewarded.

Robert: The main thing that we've implemented, and it's for everyone, is a generous pay for performance program that's based on company profitability and an individual scorecard. And so our employees this year can earn 25.5% of their base salary in bonus compensation. And so this is a person who might be picking books in the warehouse or even our C-level team members. So if the company is successful, and they're performing, then they get rewarded. And it really helps us with alignment around organizational goals as well.

AI: It really does help communicate what those goals are, doesn't it, when there's a little reward on the other side of it. That's really generous, that 25% of salary, regardless of level, is what you're saying.

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AI: And now back to today's special guest.

Yeah. So, when it comes to compensation—this is a fascinating topic—many leaders feel like they need to be “fair,” and they interpret that sometimes as treating everybody the same, including giving everyone the same pay raise. What's your view on that, Robert?

Robert: We don't give annual pay raises, Al. Just because the calendar changed over doesn't mean you're entitled to a raise. That's not a very good mentality for anyone. We have for five years in a row raised the pay for performance threshold. So when we started it, it was at nine percent of base. So typically you think most people maybe give two to three percent a year, so that first year, you could earn up to nine percent. And since then, we've raised it four or five percent a year. So we do give raises if you get more responsibility, if your job changes, or if the job market changes. So maybe the I.T. department's now more in demand, and you need to make it to market rates; we'll make those adjustments as needed. But we don't do an annual pay increase.

Al: So, it's not giving everybody the same. It's based on their performance. You mentioned, also, individual scorecards. So that comes into play, doesn't it, on these pay increases?

Robert: Yeah. So the scorecards are a big part of the percent bonus that they can make. So the good scorecard is going to allow the top 10% to achieve it 90% of the time. And so, obviously, you need to base a scorecard around the job, and that doesn't mean the top 10% of—if it's a \$10 an hour job, it's the top 10% of people that you can hire at that rate. You know, it's \$100,00, at that type of rate, obviously. So you got to make sure that it's aligned in that manner as well.

Al: So, individual scorecards for each key role. Yeah.

One of your employees made good use of the opportunity to share candid feedback, which is also anonymous in our Engagement Survey, and she or he mentions they particularly like Spirit Week at Classical Conversations. What happens—I mean, that caught my attention—what happens during Spirit Week, and how has it really helped boost the health of your culture?

Robert: Yeah. Spirit Week is a fun week where we're all encouraged, including our customers and employees, to share their Classical Conversations spirit. So we make a lot of fun videos and release them on social media, and we encourage everyone to wear themed costumes around the office each day. So one day might be Superhero Day and another day might be Pajama Day, and those type of things. And, of course, we also have merchandise for people to buy online as well around that. But it's just a lot of fun to see everyone's costumes and put together some fun videos and just encourage everyone just to kind of let loose. And it's a great team bonding as well.

Al: Yeah. That's a great way of retaining your staff, where they have fun at work at the Spirit Week. Well, I wonder if our listeners would find that helpful for their own organization. And you're including your customers in this as well as your staff. I thought that was interesting, too.

Robert: We like to think we have some of the best customers in the world, and we know that when we're excited about something, they get excited about it. And so if we can connect with them in that manner, then that just solidifies our relationship in even a different manner.

Al: Yeah. That's fantastic.

You know, another employee, speaking of employee comments, commented how your leadership treats employees with respect. And that was a theme that came back over and over again. And the

person said that when voices are raised, it's about joy and celebrations, not anger or finger pointing. These are intentional behaviors that come from a leader's heart, to be joyful, to celebrate. Tell us about the link between employees who feel respected and how you're able to retain reward and promote highly capable people.

Robert: Yeah. I think we've all heard that people don't leave companies, that they leave managers. And so we believe everyone is a soul to be nurtured, that we're all brothers and sisters in Christ, or people that we want to be brothers and sisters in Christ. And so we aren't always perfect. We mess up every day, but I think part of that respect is admitting when we are wrong as well. And so respect is a big part of all of our lives. You want to be respected, and so we want to treat others how we want to be treated. So I think that's a big part of being successful.

AI: Yeah. I wonder where that came from, that treat others the way you'd like to be treated. There's a concept. I love it.

At the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, we believe a healthy culture is a true and worthy end in itself, and we also believe that a healthy-to-flourishing culture leads to organizational growth and greater organizational impact, or in some cases, ministry impact. In your mind, how has the flourishing health of your workplace culture contributed to the educational and life impact of your students and their families?

Robert: Well, we feel our customers are some of the best and brightest in the world, and so we have to keep up with all those amazing homeschool moms and dads. And humans learn through imitation, and so if we aren't living out our core values on a daily basis, then we're not going to be able to serve our customers. And our customers trust us, and they know that we are on their side and going to be for them. Again, not always perfect, but we want to do what is right. And so I think by emulating that at the office and we have that high trust between individuals here, that helps us give confidence to our customers that they can have high trust in us. And the more we have trust in each other, then the freer we can be, the more open we can be, and, of course, that's going to allow us to be better at ministry work and continue to reach more people.

AI: It's a great growth strategy. And in your work as CEO, what's one way that you've been personally challenged and inspired to grow as a leader? I mean, that's a big topic for all of our listeners.

Robert: Well, probably like most CEOs or owners of small businesses, I didn't know what I was doing. And so when I took over leading Classical Conversations from my mom, I knew success required lifelong learning. And so that's really what I dove into is just always trying to be continuing learning, listening to great podcasts such as this, reading great books, joining C12. And so I think challenging myself not to live up to the status quo, not to live on our laurels, but to continue to get better to understand how to reach more people.

And really for us at the moment, what my biggest challenge is is we are expanding internationally. So we have just launched in Brazil. So now I've got to figure out how to really talk about these core values that we have in America to people that don't even speak our language and help them to educate the

children. So that's our newest challenge, and we're just so grateful God's brought us that opportunity to grow internationally.

AI: Well, there's a lifelong learning opportunity right there. Yeah. Good for you.

You know, before we go, Robert, I want to be sure to mention that you're involved in C12. You've mentioned it just a minute ago. You know, C12 is the largest network of Christian CEO peer advisory groups in the U.S. How is your C12 involvement reminded you of why outstanding talent matters so much in an organization?

Robert: Well, if you're a Christian business owner and you're not in C12, you are missing out on your best days. And in my C12 meetings I say, if you're in C12 and you're not doing the Best Christian Workplace Survey every year, you're missing out on your best days. And so I think every month we are reminded in our peer group that we are servants of Christ and that we are stewards of these businesses while we're here to the glory of His Kingdom. And they give us the tools not to only make our business better but also to live out our Christian values in the workplace. And I think our employees are proud that I'm in C12. I communicate the impact it's having on me and how it's impacting our organization and benefiting them. And I think it gives them confidence that the best is yet to come.

AI: I love that. That's great. Great, hope-filled vision: the best is yet to come.

Robert, gosh, I've really enjoyed what we've learned today. You know, the way you've talked about the way you attract people, and your unique sourcing method of focusing on your best customers that are aligned and who are passionate, parents who really care about children, and how you really focus on hiring the right person, and you're patient in actually doing that, and how your retention strategy around the three key words—trust, flexibility, and family first—is important, and the way you reward your top talent through pay for performance and a couple of different methods. Those are great insights, and I encourage our leaders who are listening to think about the way you're doing that in your organization.

You know, Robert, given all that you've experienced in your ongoing transformation and greater health of your culture, give us one final thought that you'd like to leave with ministry leaders and also Christian-led businesses.

Robert: Yeah, that's good. I think one of the things we say here is a good ministry is a good business, and a good business is a good ministry. And we are all about our Father's business during our time here on Earth, and those in ministry who reinforce that with their words, policies, and actions will see tremendous growth. But, sadly, I see many ministries and organizations reinforcing the idea, mostly unintentionally, that you're only Christian when you're within the confines of the church walls. So I really encourage everyone to consider, the actions that they're putting in place, does it reinforce the idea that you're only Christian inside your church, or does it reinforce the idea you're Christian 24/7, 365?

Al: So, Robert Bortins, the CEO of Classical Conversations, based in Southern Pines, North Carolina, thank you for sharing your wisdom, insights, and stories, and thank you for extending your ministry and knowledge to leaders who are listening and benefiting from all you've shared with us today.

Robert: Thank you, Al, for having me. It's been a pleasure. And we pray for your ministry to continue to flourish.

Al: And I want to thank you, our listeners, for joining us on the *Flourishing Culture Podcast* and for investing this time in your workplace culture today. And if there's a specific insight, story, or action step that you've enjoyed in our conversation with Robert, please share it with others that they can benefit as well. And, please review the show wherever you listen to podcasts.

This program is copyrighted by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. All rights reserved. Our writer is Mark Cutshall, and our social media is Solape Osoba, just two of our outstanding, talented individuals. And this is Al Lopus, reminding you that a healthy culture drives greater impact and growth in your organization. I'll see you again soon on the *Flourishing Culture Podcast*.

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