The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series
"7 Things You Didn't Know About Inspirational Leadership"
September 23, 2019

Craig Springer

Intro: Meet the well-known ministry organization whose flourishing staff culture helped attract 366,000 participants in 6,500 churches around the world last year alone. The amazing story, next.

Female: This is the *Flourishing Culture Podcast*. Here's your host, president of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, Al Lopus.

Al Lopus: Welcome to another episode of the *Flourishing Culture Podcast*, where our goal is to equip and inspire you to build a flourishing workplace. We are here to help you eliminate workplace distrust, improve your employees' experience, and grow your organization's impact. And before we meet our special guest today, I urge you to subscribe to this podcast. As a result, you'll receive our action guide. It's our gift to help you lead your organization's culture to the next level. To subscribe, simply go to bcwinstitute.org/podcast. Hit the Subscribe button, and receive our free action guide.

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And now, let's meet today's special guest.

Hello, and thanks for joining us again on the *Flourishing Culture Podcast*. Today we're going to look at inspirational leadership, which is the sixth of the eight drivers that can take the health of your workplace culture to the next level. And my guest today knows a lot about inspirational leadership because of his character, leadership, and convictions are going to give you some fresh, new insights on how to improve and strengthen your own workplace culture. And with that, I want to welcome Craig Springer, the executive director of Alpha USA.

Hi, Craig, and I'm so glad you can join us. Welcome to the *Flourishing Culture Podcast*.

Craig Springer: Al, hello. Thank you, and thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to spend this time together.

Al: I am, too. And, Craig, it's amazing to realize the millions of people in, what, 169 countries or so around the world that are involved in Alpha. Tell us a little more about it before we look into this topic of inspiration leadership.

Craig: Yeah. I first interacted with Alpha as a pastor in two large church settings. We were struggling to find a way to reach those outside the church, especially in an increasing post-Christian setting. And Alpha was founded in London, so this global, secular city center. And since, some 30 years later now, almost 26 million people have gone through it. It's a course that runs for free in churches. In the U.S., we're working with 6500 churches, and last year, over 366,000 participants. And it's really the basics of the Christian faith, but the groups are designed to be listening focused, allowing guests to come in. We don't correct them. We don't judge their point of view. It's food, so great hospitality. A short film, and then it's all about that discussion where people can belong before they believe. And we've seen incredible fruit from people saying yes to Jesus over the years through it.

Al: I've had good friends that have come to faith because of Alpha, and I'm personally grateful.

Craig: Oh, good.

Al: Yeah. Twenty-six million people, that's really amazing.

But there's another powerful story to tell about Alpha, and that's the remarkable three-year transformation of your workplace culture. And I think you'll agree that this story, which is really your story, has something very important and practical to say to our listeners, virtually every person who's listening, whether it's working in a ministry or organization, which many do, or a church or even a Christian-owned or Christian-led business. So tell us about the story, this three-year transformation.

Craig: Yeah. I stepped into Alpha in 2016, the organizational leadership, and the ministry itself's been phenomenal. We had been in a multi-year sort of interim-leadership situation where the board was kind of holding as they're re-strategizing for the future of Alpha. And certainly not by anyone's intention, but what happens over time is there was just a culture of some limiting communication, limiting the impact of our ministry, and siloed sort of work groups, and just a lack of healthy, strong alignment across the board. And we could feel it. We knew that we were struggling in a lot of areas. But we were able to sort of sit back, then, and with the help of Best Christian Workplace, get under the hood of what was happening in reality and begin to learn some key lessons from that.

Al: So, Craig, I've got to ask, and I'd love to have you tell our audience, so when you got the job, what was one of the first things that you did?

Craig: Well, I did, before we even began, have the team take the Best Christian Workplace survey, and thankfully, I've had the chance of utilizing it in a couple of their leadership roles. And I mean, facts are our friends, as leaders. We want to know reality. We want to know the truth. We want to know which teams within the whole organization are thriving and which aren't. And I think it was probably one of the greatest tools that served our organization that first year. It created a setting of vulnerability where we can all say to one another, "Here's what's working. Here's what's not. Here's how I feel about that." And because we had that from the start, insight, everything that I was able to build together with the

team was based off of team input and that goal of trust and aligning hearts and flourishing culture. So it made a huge impact in our first year.

Al: Yeah, so, I'll encourage our listeners: follow Craig's example because, it was probably one of the first things that landed on your desk when you arrived was the results. And rather than spend—of course, you have a distributed workforce—but rather than travel and spend individual time, you got a sense right away of the health of your culture.

Craig: Yeah. And it gives objective truth. I think I'm probably guilty of always overestimating the health of culture, thinking, "Well, everyone I talked to, it seems positive," or "Everyone I talked to, seems like they trust leadership." But when you create that objective experience through the survey, the truth really does come out, helpfully.

Al: Yeah. No, it does. But like all great stories, your story of workplace transformation has a clear beginning, middle, and end, and 2016 is the beginning. So let's go back. In 2016, your employees at Alpha USA completed the survey. The report landed on your desk, one of your first days on the job, and, well, what did it say?

Craig: I think we landed at a 3.68, which is in the toxic category, and I think it was a hard reality for all of us, even those newer to the team. No one ever wants to be there. But to acknowledge that there's missing trust among leadership, among different departments, there were sort of promises made that, not intentionally, weren't able to be kept. There was opportunities for performance growth left on the table, and again, it created that opportunity for conversation.

And I think one of my key learnings is it's not actually the survey that provides the transformation; it's everything you do after you get those results. It's just a mere—it's just a point in time. And so we latched onto those results, and every department and then macro, as a whole staff, we created action plans, which is part of the coaching from Best Christian Workplace. And we stuck with that, though—and maybe we can talk about that a little bit later—but the key was keeping the conversation going, coming up with improvements, and revisiting it over and over again, not letting it sort of fall into whiteboard wasteland where we talked about it once and then it disappeared.

Al: Yeah, right. I love that. So many times, it's whiteboard wasteland.

Well, let's go back, and give us a snapshot or maybe even a brief story of what a toxic culture really looked like for you. People tell me that they can feel it. They can tell the difference between a 3.68 or a 4.0 or a 4.25. What did that feel like as you walked in?

Craig: Maybe an example, a mistake that I made that contributed to the challenges of emerging out of that, we had attempted to sort of centralize our funding from sort of a regional model to a centralized model. And I didn't do a great job of gaining input from everyone for whom that decision would greatly impact, and we landed that decision, thinking it made great strategic sense. And it sort of opened the floodgates of, this is how it always happens. Leadership decisions get made, top down, without gaining input. We've missed important feedback. We haven't brought people's hearts along the way. And so it created tension and arguments and all of the subtle or not so subtle unspoken messages

are, "Oh, they don't trust me," or "They don't value my voice," or "They don't understand what this feels like on the front lines." And so I'll own it. I perpetuated that with that initial decision. And we had to do quite a bit of backtrack and apology and building trust again.

I think lack of trust is the key ingredient that we felt. And it showed up in minimal effective conflict resolution, minimal seeking of input from people at different levels, and then I think just a minimal impact to the ministry as well.

Al: Well, I think many of us can relate to tension in the workplace and arguments and just attitudes that, "Well, management doesn't really understand," especially new people coming in, a cynicism. Those are not easy places to work out of, necessarily.

So, let's try to understand what's going on inside your culture. And as you and I have talked about, inspirational leadership is one of the eight proven drivers that improve and help to improve culture to a healthier, flourishing level. And it's one of the two strongest predictors of employee engagement across all of the sectors surveyed by BCWI. And at its core, inspirational leadership is connected to the leaders' relationship with Christ, their own personal relationship with Christ. It makes perfect sense that leaders who are inspirational demonstrate spiritual maturity and a growing, deepening, even personal relationship with Jesus. They also perceive that they're direct, truthful, reliable, consistent, trustworthy, and that they really show care and compassion for employees.

And in that first year ,even though the results were where they were, in that first year, it did show that there were three items that were in your bottom 10. And they were just issues around job security, the sense of being well managed, and this trust level that you talked about. So as an executive director, apologize for the long question, but as an executive director, what did you do with this information, and what was your thought process?

Craig: I mean, there's so many steps. I think the first is in receiving the feedback, really avoid the finger-pointing blame game or the witch hunt. There were three or four bad apples in the mix that— and really take it to heart and say of myself and of our team, "This is reality. This is the culture we've created or we've allowed—" to borrow one of Dr. Henry Cloud's phrases—and just to take ownership of that and humbly acknowledge that we openly share the feedback with the team. We didn't hide it. I think that is another temptation as well. Or only to sort of deliver bits and pieces that were more favorable to the whole team, but really lay it out before the team.

We worked very hard to create an action plan, and I mentioned that just a little bit earlier, but our action plan that first year probably broke all the rules. I think it had, like, 36 items on it, which is probably way, way too much. But some of what we needed to build were systems to improve the management of the organization, healthier performance reviews, clearer goals.

One of, I think, the most effective things we did is, with the whole team, we created what we call staff operating values. So we have values as an organization that are external about our strategy, but we didn't have values that defined our culture. And I realized we actually need to spell out the culture that we want to create. And so together as a team, we took a year and wrote those out, and now those values are the components of our performance evaluation. So we say it doesn't matter just what we

achieve but how we achieve it together. So I think receiving the feedback while creating an action plan, working the action plan, revisiting it honestly on a monthly basis, celebrating sort of a year's cycle, doing it again.

And then another thing, it just takes time. I had to go around to each team and own and apologize for the obvious areas of fault. And then rebuild a solution around it. So I think the danger in getting vulnerable feedback from the engagement survey is if we don't act on it, then we're actually digging the wounds deeper. And if all we just talk a good game but don't follow through on it, then we're perpetuating that same problem where people are less motivated to get feedback in the future.

Al: Craig, let me ask. So you had some bad results to start with, and you just laid it out. You communicated the good, the bad, the ugly. And a lot of times leaders are cautious about just telling—they want to give you all the good news and not the bad news. What was the impact? How did your staff receive it as a result of the way you laid that out?

Craig: It was a huge amount of relief to have everyone seeing it and sharing it and owning it. Nothing healthy can grow in the darkness, and it just needs a light, and that I think acknowledging our teams are adult enough, mature enough to receive that feedback, it communicates value to them just in sharing it. It is also a sense of personal accountability on the leadership because now that I've shared this, I have to make good on plans to improve this. There is sort of a shrewd amount of accountability for ourselves to say—one other point is being careful, throughout these three years, to undo this unspoken "us and them" culture where the leadership is sort of one category and then the rest of the staff are another category. And I think how we handled it, feedback can either accelerate the "us and them" differentiation, or not, and say this is our, together, organization. As leaders, we have a huge responsibility here, but every single one of us are creating and allowing this type of culture. So it actually creates a more, flatter ownership for the results.

Al: Mm-hmm, yeah. Boy, that's great.

I trust you're enjoying our podcast today. We'll be right back after an important word for leaders.

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Al: And now, back to today's special guest.

In 2017, that marked the middle of your three-year story that we're capturing here. And you surveyed again with the engagement survey, and the score revealed it actually improved significantly, and you

were right on the cusp of healthy from being in the kind of deep-toxic range to right on the cusp of healthy. So, what was that like? How satisfying was that for you and your team with that great improvement in one year?

Craig: Yeah. I think we went from a 3.68 to a 3.93 or 3.95, just under healthy, like you said. I mean, I'd by lying if I didn't think we were going to hit a 5.0 and want that. So, I think every leader is like, "Why isn't it a 5.0?" So, very excited to see the progress. And I think what we realized is that second year, it really did begin to show where there were unique pockets of growth patterns in certain departments, where sort of our front-lines teams were all in the healthy or even some flourishing category. And then a lot of our central-support teams were lagging behind, and that showed an important shift in how we needed to manage and serve those teams more effectively, show them the value of their work, clean up even more of our internal processes. And that is where you begin to start to see where there's some manager deficiencies of different teams or departments that need to be addressed through coaching and training. So it was very, very helpful to see which areas of the ministry were able to progress forward.

And just to mention, I think taking the engagement survey just once, all you're doing is sort of plotting something on the map. The real goal comes when you take it year after year after year, and you can see how different strategies from our action plan move the needle forward or different strategies didn't or which departments are lagging. So I think it's that time continuum that was really helpful to begin to see those patterns emerge.

Al: Yeah, that's really interesting, isn't it. You know what you did to work on something, and by measuring it, you can actually see what worked and what didn't.

Craig: That was the most rewarding—and sorry just to jump in. We celebrated our socks off, too, by the way, and especially to say, "Hey, look. Look, we agreed we were going to put into the action plan, and then look how it objectively changed our culture. "And it's a real boost for everyone.

Al: Yeah. Boy, and just a great point. Celebrating is a key and important part of this.

So you then went through the cycle again. You did more action planning, you continued to talk about it, and then the best was yet to come because then the next year, 2018, you surveyed for a third consecutive year, and as a result of your leadership, the key initiatives you mentioned, the health of your culture reached the flourishing level. I mean, you just jumped over healthy and right to flourishing, over a 4.25. So I'll bet you've got a favorite story or two of what you saw and felt and how you felt the before-and-after difference in your people. Tell us about that.

Craig: Yeah, I think we had just taken a team retreat not long before, and we were all reflecting thing, this feels like flourishing. And there are some of the intangibles, just that sense of love and connection that we feel towards each teammate, conversations flow easier, we can plan strategic initiatives quicker. You know the concept of the speed of trust, it's the quickest way to get stuff done and share openly. And so we just have a lot more fun. We're prayerful. We're celebrating each other. Conflicts can be resolved with very easy, open dialogue. There's sort of a seamlessness across departments, working together, and you just hear it in the language. There's almost no talking behind one another's backs,

ever. And part of it is because we've declared that's not who we are. But even in an unhealthy culture, a lot of work happens after the meeting or in between and talking a little bit negatively or subtly negatively about other people, and that's just been worked out of the team's culture.

I think as people know, I can go have a healthy conversation and work this out and live into this set of cultural values that we're upholding. And, also, to point back to these staff operating values that are part of our performance-review process now, those cultural values that uphold a flourishing culture, that's how we rate our teammates. That's how you get your score at the end of the year. And it does even affect pay increase or not. And so it's now worked its way into the systems. And as we're onboarding new people, we're regular getting feedback from them, just saying, "This is such an amazing culture. I'm so thankful be a part of this." So it's exciting.

Al: It is exciting.

And in the third year, some of the areas that were once bottom-10 items, that I mentioned before, did an about-face, and they soared into your top 10—the level of trust, job security, a sense of Alpha being well managed—all increased by leaps and bounds. And even more than before, your employees said that the leaders at Alpha USA reflect Christ to the world. So having been through such a radical, positive transformation of your culture's health, what's one thing that you want fellow leaders to know through this process? What's on your heart, Craig?

Craig: Well, I really do think we have to own the culture. I know the temptation is to defend or deflect. I mean, I feel it in myself when we get challenging cultural feedback. I mean, the fact that people might be listening to this podcast means they're open to receiving the feedback. But I think, again, it's true: we get what we create or what we allow when it comes to culture. And then vulnerably owning that, genuinely apologizing to teammates, and then working hard to mitigate those problems.

And the most strategic thing I can recommend is build out an action plan. Create, not just for the organization but every department creates their own action plan, and hit it multiple times a year. We'll do two retreats this year: one to create action plans, one midyear to review them, and then a couple check-ins along the way, and then we'll celebrate at the end. You got to work the steps if we want to see the fruit.

Al: Right, right. It does take true intention to work through those plans. And when you do, there is fruit.

Now, you've mentioned writing out cultural values, and also, you've created a leadership covenant. Can you tell me a little more about that?

Craig: Sure. With our leadership covenant, we have piecemealed different teachings from various organizations we've been a part of. One of the things we've built in are Andy Stanley's six values of trust and trustworthiness. So rather than filling any gap with suspicion, we choose to fill it with trust and various other commitments. We talk about the value for leadership-team members to lead out of their own voice. This has been a huge learning for me, where the second- or third-tier managers don't lead in saying things like, "Craig really wants this project done by Tuesday," but own it. It creates that

power distance when people don't lead out of their own voice. So things like that. We talked about leading in our leadership covenant, having Lencioni's what was your first team; it's the highest team that you're participating in. So we're not defending our own department's needs, but we're representing the needs of the organization. So we landed on some of those things for leadership covenant.

And for our staff operating values, it's things that land in those categories of character, culture, chemistry, and competence, and humility, integrity, spiritual momentum, faithful follow-through, leaving a positive way, being an ambassador, etc., etc. So, again, I realized culture can be so ethereal, but we actually can write out with words the culture we want to see, and then teach around those, build team gatherings around those. And so we just actually put pen to paper and said, "Okay, let's write out the culture we want to become," and built initiatives around that.

Al: Yeah. So write it down is what you're suggesting.

So, Craig, in the time we have left, I'd really like to have you give us your best advice on two quick points. The first is that our research shows that inspirational leadership in Christian organization reflects Christian character, such as leaders reflecting the fruit of the Spirit and compassion and humility, as well as that the operation experiences fellowship and keeping a focus on Christ and reflecting Christ to the world as well as operational excellence. What advice do you have to give to fellow leaders on how to develop leadership?

Craig: Yeah, I think what we all know but we all need to be reminded of, that what we can only give away what we've been receiving ourselves. And so holding myself, ourselves, to the highest standard of seeking Christ personally, privately, and making sure that, especially in Christian ministry settings, that our teams are doing that together vulnerably and creating space to allow the shepherding of people's hearts in those team settings to prayer, checking in on what we're learning through scripture, sharing vulnerably about our lives. And that's been a real growth for me over this last few years of being willing to be vulnerable with our team personally and checking in on how I'm growing spiritually with them creates a level of accountability. So that, I think, has played into—people can have—many cases, I think that leaders of Christian organizations probably do have great integrity and spiritual life, but maybe the teams don't know it, because they just don't know enough of the leader's heart. And so making sure that we're creating space to share our hearts, letting our team see our hearts I think is really important.

Al: Yeah, right. And second, our research also shows that working with hundreds of leaders, as we have, we also know that an inspirational leadership in Christian organizations reflects high levels of trust and integrity, and with trust comes transparency as well. How about a favorite story about trust and integrity when it comes to inspirational leadership?

Craig: Yeah. I had alluded to it a little bit earlier, but the idea that we were going to sort of centralize our funding instead of regionally, and that happened early on my tenure. And there were some agreements made prior to my time that teammates came and said, "Hey, these agreements haven't been kept in the way that we were going to roll this out." And so I had to own that and again apologize; that's on me. And I didn't think that the sort of backtracking plan was the best strategic move, but it

was the best move for integrity and for team culture. And so we backtracked and reworked that plan and kept sort of our regional funding system in place. And it's built great trust. Now the teams work together and share learnings and resources across those boundaries. And I think if we've made a mistake, we've got to own it. We have to say we were wrong. We have to apologize, and we have to do what we need to do to make it right. And if we don't avoid those mistakes and those conversations but we really engage vulnerably, I think we can earn back more trust. It's sort of like a bone that is fractured. It can heal with more strength than before the injury if we handle those recovery processes effectively.

Al: Which is just really not intuitive for a lot of leaders to feel like, "Well, I need to be vulnerable and maybe even admit a mistake here." But sometimes taking a step backward allows you to take several steps forward. That's kind of what you've described, isn't it.

Craig: Absolutely.

Al: Yeah.

Okay, well, Craig, let me put a bow on this, and I'd like to read you an unsolicited comment from one of your employees at Alpha USA, who has been part of your culture's transformation. And here's what she said, and I quote, "Alpha's team culture has improved dramatically. We are more and more reflecting the qualities of Alpha in our team. There is fun and laughter. There's a commitment to prayer. There's an increased commitment to clear communication. There is stability in staff. There is financial stability, not living beyond our means." When you listen to that comment, how does that make you feel, Craig?

Craig: It's incredible. And in the good sense of the word, I mean there's nothing I'm more proud of for our team to have rallied in that way. And I know those words are true because I feel them myself. And our ability to achieve our mission and our vision depends on that kind of culture. And so to me it's just the greatest win, knowing that our teams are having that experience, and that it's translating to the impact on our goals. So I'm so thankful to hear that.

Al: Well, Craig, I've really enjoyed what we've learned today. Boy, it's been like drinking out of a fire hydrant, in a lot of ways. I love kind of the sense of where you started, and that is where you felt tension, you felt there were lots of arguments, there was cynicism, there's a lack of trust, conflict wasn't handled that well to start with. I mean, that's where many organizations and leaders start when they really want to transform the health of their culture. But you started by receiving the feedback. You really openly shared the results, and you developed action plans around systems and improving performance reviews and creating clearer goals. And I really appreciate the creating operating values and spelling out the way you wanted the culture to become, and that you owned it and really eliminated that "us versus them" approach. So, boy, we've just learned a lot.

And given all that you've shared with us and how inspirational leadership really helps drive a healthy and even flourishing culture, how about a final thought that you'd like to leave with leaders today?

Craig: Yeah. Thank you. You can change culture. It's never too far gone, and there is science to it. It's both an art and a science, but there is science. It's get the feedback, work the plan, have the conversations, and you can take those cultural indicators forward, I think. Don't be afraid of it, discuss it at length, and again, map out that plan. It does require, though, the leader owning the process and the steps required, not just delegating it off to someone else. But it can be changed, for sure.

Al: That's right. All right, great. Craig Springer, executive director of Alpha USA, based in Naperville, Illinois, thank you for sharing your wisdom, insights, and stories, and thank you for extending your ministry to the leaders who have been listening and benefiting from all you've shared today. It's really been a pleasure, Craig. Thank you.

Craig: It's been a joy, Al. Thank you so much.

Outro: I want to thank you for joining us on the *Flourishing Culture Podcast* and for investing this time in your workplace culture today. If there's a specific insight, story, or action step you've enjoyed in these past few minutes, then please share it with others so they can benefit as well. If you've enjoyed this podcast, please be sure to show your support by rating, reviewing, and subscribing wherever you listen. You can also share this podcast with friends on social media.

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