



The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series

“Building the Happiest Place on Earth Through Life-Giving Work”

March 11, 2019

Paul MacDonald

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 on the Flourishing Culture Podcast. Today we’re continuing our new series on the “Eight Ways to Build a Flourishing Workplace Culture.” Each week we’re giving you a close-up look at one of the eight factors that make up what we call the FLOURISH model. In the next few minutes, you’ll see how the FLOURISH model is a key to building a healthier workplace culture that leads to greater organizational impact. Today we look at the second of the eight drivers that make up the FLOURISH model. It’s called life-giving work. If you want to see how life-giving work can help transform your culture, all you need to do is listen to the insights, wisdom, and stories of my guest today, Paul MacDonald, the headmaster of Crossings Christian School in Oklahoma City. Welcome, Paul. Welcome to the Flourishing Culture Podcast.

Paul MacDonald: Thanks, Al. It’s a pleasure to visit with you again.

Al: And I’m really glad that we’ve had this chance, and you’ve been with us before, and thanks for coming back.

Before we get into the practical takeaways of life-giving work, that we have in store for our listeners, give us a snapshot of Crossings Christian school and what sets it apart for your students and families.

Paul: Well, Al, we’re the largest private school in the Oklahoma City area, with about 1,100 students. We sit on a beautiful multimillion-dollar campus built within the last few years on the campus of one of Oklahoma City’s most influential churches. I think we’re set apart by the fact that we’ve got a phenomenal staff that delivers a rigorous college prep program enhanced by a wide offering of arts and athletic opportunities.

AI: Wow. Sounds like a great place. And let's start off our conversation with a personal reflection, Paul. What for you is the most life giving in your role as headmaster of Crossings Christian School?

Paul: Well, I'm confident when I say probably the most life-giving thing is when I hear that our students are doing well, whether it's the ones who are still here or the ones who have gone on to college and life. Third John Four says I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth, and that's what really energizes me.

AI: Yeah. Amen. I love that. And what a privilege it is to serve in that way. Paul, having surveyed your employees with BCWI twice and yourself leading a flourishing workplace, you know the tremendous value of life-giving work in a culture, especially a Christian school like yours. You know, Crossings Christian School has a great story to tell about life-giving work, and let's use this to tell the story. First, let's define what life-giving work is all about and why it matters, and second, then, we'll talk about how you describe some of the practical action steps that you've taken to make life-giving work so relevant and rewarding to so many. And as we go along, I can't wait to hear your stories that help our listeners find a piece of their own story and so that they can take the next steps and improve the health of their workplace culture. That's what we hear in our reader surveys and our listener surveys is that they really like those action steps, those practical steps, that people take. So I'm really looking forward to it. How does this sound to you?

Paul: Sounds great.

AI: Great.

Paul: I guess I would say that life-giving work around here is teaching and education, and that's life-giving I think because it's the opportunity to influence and change lives. Recently, my wife and I attended the wedding of one of our graduates in another state, and it was so empowering to hear her parents introduce us at the reception as the people who had changed their daughter's life. That's why it matters. We get to imitate the Lord's example and then hopefully see our students follow hard after Him as well.

AI: What a rewarding experience. That's fantastic. Let's start off. Our research shows that life-giving work is one of the most important predictors of employee engagement across all sectors, along with inspirational leadership. And in the survey, we asked six questions that uncover the level of staff alignment with life-giving work, which includes spiritual-gift alignment with work, skills alignment, having fun at work, the mission and goals of the school make people feel like their jobs are important, along with clear expectations, and having people with decision-making authority they need to have to do a good job. So when work is life-giving, engagement is strong and often employees can't even imagine doing any other kind of work or working in any other organization. They get really pumped up about it. And in Christian organizations, life-giving work certainly is a competitive advantage that we have in this tight labor market. Paul, what's one of your favorite stories of where you've seen life-giving work as a real, maybe everyday, part of the Crossings workplace culture.

Paul: Well, I think, AI, you're exactly right about everybody wanting to see that their lives matter and that they're in work that they can't walk away from, and I think along with that, everyone likes to know

what's expected of them and then to be noticed when they do a good job. Here at Crossings we've intentionally developed a strategy to recruit and retain the best staff members and then give them as much autonomy as possible to deliver the mission of the school. Getting highly engaged staff on the right seats on the bus is the critical piece to a successful school, and I think our proof is in the pudding as our staff is well-respected by parents, by students, and then our students are experiencing great success in their endeavors both as they leave us and then when they come back and report on their successes.

We had one of our senior recognition nights recently, and I know staff members were invigorated to hear tributes to many of them from the senior athletes being offered.

We also like to have fun and plan as many fellowship opportunities throughout the school year to give people the chance to enjoy their co-workers' company. When we do professional development, we try and provide a meal, that staff can have a chance to relax and have fun together.

AI: Oh, that's great. Now, let me ask you, Paul, some of these fun activities, these fellowship opportunities, is there one or two that come to mind? These are hard to plan for a lot of leaders, and so they're always looking for good ideas. What's an idea or two that come to mind?

Paul: Well, we try to do a Christmas party with the staff every year. This year at the Christmas party, I remember it was particularly fun because our dean of fine arts turned it into a comedy routine, and we also have cameras throughout this school as part of our security protocol, and they did a blooper reel with funny things that happened with staff that were caught on the camera.

AI: That is fun. That's great. Good. Paul, when the school was first surveyed by BCW back in February of 2017, you were already at a flourishing level, particularly with life-giving work. And the score showed that you were, to use our jargon, 0.32 points above the average Christian school in this category on our 5-point scale. That's just unbelievable. That's soaring. So, as you and your senior leadership team realized the importance of how to improve the health of your workplace culture, what observations from the results, what insights, or what convictions were you becoming most aware of when you digested this information?

Paul: Well, the findings from the first survey were very, very positive, but they did point out several areas that we needed to address, particularly in terms of compensation packages, paid time off, and recognizing exemplary work. We've been intentional in addressing these issues, and I think this year's survey was indicative of this.

AI: Yeah. Yeah, we saw great progress. You know, your score for life-giving work even increased over the previous year in the most recent survey: an average of a 4.75 on our 5-point scale for the questions in this driver. Today your high survey scores for life-giving work would be the envy of many Christian leaders. Give us an example, teach us a strategy or an approach that you've taken to strengthen the health of life-giving work.

Paul: Well, I sure can't take the credit. Our governing board is remarkable in their support for the staff, and I take every opportunity to remind the faculty or to express that to them, particularly after board

meetings. At the board's initiative, we made two increases to our people's salaries this year. The public schools had ramped up salary scales for the public-school teachers—probably noticed nationally that they went kind of on strike—and so we knew we wanted to keep our salaries right there with the public schools. So we made two increases to people's salaries this year: one at the beginning of the year and then another two months in, which expressed just how valued the team of people are at the school. And the board's always looking for ways to honor the staff and for strategies to recruit the very best people we can find.

Al: Now, Paul, do you have a specific philosophy about how you match the local schools?

Paul: Well, prior to the strike, we actually were ahead of the local schools. Our board says, "We want to have the very best people that are available." So we fell a little bit behind when they gave all the public-school teachers a \$6,000 bump in the pay scale, but we're committed to getting back up there again.

Al: Wow. So, I have a daughter who is a public-school teacher here in the Seattle area, and she got a nice increase as well, so you are right on top of it. And first of all, as we're even talking about that, let me appreciate your humility in giving others credit. That's a good sign of leadership to start with, but to have your governing board step up and understand the importance of competitiveness of pay and how you're able to attract highly capable people is really impressive. So that's fantastic.

Al: I trust you're enjoying our podcast. We'll be right back after this brief word about a valuable tool that can pinpoint the true, measurable health of your culture.

Male: What if you could get an upper hand on unwanted turnover, relationship conflicts, struggling morale, and unproductive staff, and, at the same time, increase the effectiveness and impact of your organization? You can with the Best Christian Workplaces Employee Engagement Survey. This popular, proven resource pinpoints the true health of your workplace culture and ways to improve it.

You'll get a detailed breakout summary of the eight essential ways your culture and your organization can flourish, all from a principled, practical, faith-based approach that works. Join the more than 800 satisfied organizations, churches, and Christian-owned businesses who have said, "Yes." Sign up online today at bcwinstitute.org. The Best Christian Workplaces Employee Engagement Survey. It's your first important step on the road to a flourishing culture.

Al: All right. Now, let's hear more from today's guest.

You know, Paul, as we all know, life-giving work is never automatic in a culture. Other key culture drivers like fantastic teams or outstanding talent or even sustainable strategy interlink with life-giving work and also need to be cultivated. Give us a strategic step that your leadership or the collective staff have achieved to further life-giving work at Crossings Christian School.

Paul: That's a great question. And we've been intentional and try as often as possible to affirm the staff and express that they are the key to the mission. In fact, they're the delivery system of the mission. I have the opportunity once a week at each of our three schools—the lower school, the middle school, and the upper school—to lead that respective school's morning devotion. I use that as my opportunity

to tell staff what a great job they're doing and how valued they are. And it's also during those times that I integrate stories of individuals and groups that I've observed doing outstanding work. That's really not that hard to do, as our people are doing a great job. And as I walk throughout the campus, I see examples of this kind of work constantly.

AI: You know, that's almost like books that we've read about, where you catch somebody doing good work and you recognize it and that really encourages them. Yeah, I just love that, Paul, affirming the staff. And you mentioned earlier, just make sure people know what's expected of them and notice when they're doing a good job and affirm them and particularly at meetings, like all-staff devotions that you have mentioned. That's fantastic. I appreciate that story.

Clearly, no workplace culture is perfect. That causes me to ask, if you had to pinpoint one unhealthy characteristic that can eat away—you know, let's look at it from the other side—what could eat away from life-giving work? What would you say to that?

Paul: Well, I think that when someone forgets to count their blessings and the blessings of the job or workplace, that lack of gratitude breeds discontent. My wife and I have used Philippians 4:8 as our mission statement for our marriage. And I think it's remarkably applicable to Christian organizations. If we focus on the things that are true and noble and right and pure and lovely and admirable and the things that are excellent or praiseworthy and think about those things in the people we work with, in the organization we're privileged to be a part of, we can stay energized and avoid lack of motivation and poor performance.

AI: Yeah. Wow. True, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. Oftentimes, those aren't things that you hear at the water cooler, so to say. That's great advice. Wow. Thank you.

And as you look at the past three years, you know, as you've worked with us at Crossings Christian School, what's one of the greatest results or outcomes that your flourishing culture is having on the mission, you know, in terms of an outcome at Crossings Christian School?

Paul: Well, since I've been here, one of my mantras has been that our lower school is Disneyland, the happiest place on Earth. The people are happy, the kids are happy. And it's interesting. When I say that at the other two schools, the faculty challenge me and say their building is also Disneyland, particularly new members to the staff that have been elsewhere and realize how positive our culture is. I think because the DNA of our school is so positive, our students and adults are generally pretty happy, and this is a good place to teach and go to school.

AI: Wow. So, Disneyland, the happiest place on Earth. Now, somebody's going to ask, "Well, if it's the happiest place on Earth, are these kids actually learning anything?"

Paul: Okay, I would say that our kids are doing really, really well in school. We have some of the highest ACT scores in the state, our high school academic team has won the state championship for the last seven years and won it again this year, so I think our academic prowess is evident.

Al: Yeah. Boy, that's fantastic. So, kids are learning. And I really love what you're saying, that the DNA of your school is so positive that your students and adults are really not only happy but that kind of environment seems to foster learning and growth for your students. One other question. You know, we know that life-giving work is one of the top two of the eight flourishing factors that drive the health of a thriving workplace culture. In your mind, which of these other seven drivers might be linked most closely to life-giving work? Do you have any thoughts on that, Paul?

Paul: Well, I think I'd list two because I think they're inexorably linked: fantastic teams and outstanding talent. If you're part of a fantastic team filled with outstanding talent, it's a joy to go to work each day.

Al: You know, I've talked with people over and over again that just dread going to work because the culture is just not very positive. But yeah, who doesn't want to be on a fantastic team with outstanding talent? Yeah, those two come together. I love that.

You know, as we come down to the final stretch here of our time together, let me just congratulate you because Crossings Christian School is just off the charts in all eight of our drivers. It really remarkably speaks of your leadership. And, of course, you'll deflect that, I know, but stepping back to see the big picture, how do you get so healthy? You know, what are the two or three things that will advise every organization or practice to ensure healthy practice? What can you share with our audience?

Paul: Well, you're very kind, but I'm not sure it's my leadership. I think it's maybe my knowledge that organizations are only as good as their weakest link. So I remind our leadership team that we have to be intentional about getting the best people available, and they've done an outstanding job of that. And then I already mentioned, we have a great board that's committed phenomenal support for the staff. So that's made this an easy place to lead.

Al: Well, positive DNA, a great board, and, again, bringing top talent into the board is really critical to support the school, explaining to people in your staff what's expected, notice when they're doing a good job, recruit really talented people, respect them, and don't let a lack of gratitude eat away at your culture. Those are all a great summary of what we've talked about. And given how far your staff culture's grown and is thriving in light of our FLOURISH model, give us one final thought, Paul, about what you'd like to leave with our ministry or organization leaders today.

Paul: Well, I think that one's an easy answer. We have got to remember to be grateful for the people God's allowed us to lead, and then we have to regularly express that gratitude to them, to others, and to the Lord.

Al: Yeah. Reminds me of the scripture that leaders should be shepherding the flock in which God has entrusted to them—

Paul: That's right.

Al: —and you've just given us a great way of expressing that, to express gratitude to them and to others and to the Lord for what He has provided. So, Paul McDonald, the headmaster of Crossings

Christian School in Oklahoma City, 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 with us today. Thank you.

Paul: Well, Al, thanks for giving me the opportunity and for the valuable information that the Best Christian Workplaces Institute has provided us.

Al: Oh, it's been our pleasure.

And to our listeners, I want to thank you for joining us on the Flourishing Culture Podcast and our new continuing series the "Eight Ways to Build a Flourishing Culture."

Next week, we'll take a look at life-giving work, the second of the eight drivers that come up in the FLOURISH model and drives the thriving workplace culture. I think you'll really enjoy what our special guest has to say about workplace culture.

So, thank you 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 these past few minutes, please share it with others so that they can benefit from it 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, our social media assistant is Solape Osoba, and this is Al Lopus, reminding you that a healthy culture drives greater influence and impact for your organization. I'll see you again soon on the Flourishing Culture Podcast.

Male: For a free transcript of today's podcast, visit blog.bcwinstitute.org. Join us next week for another one-to-one interview with a respected Christian leader. The Flourishing Culture Podcast with Al Lopus is a presentation of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, helping Christian organizations set the standard as the best, most effective places to work in the world.