The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series
"Three Keys to Building Trust With Your Staff"
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Al Lopus

Al Lopus: Hello, and thanks for joining us today as we kick off season two of the Flourishing Culture Podcast. In our listener survey last fall, the number one topic you were interested in hearing about was how to build a trust-based culture. Today we're going to turn the tables, and Rachel Large is going to interview me.

We're calling this *Three Keys to Building Trust With Your Staff*. Joining me today is Rachel Large. Rachel is our dynamic communications coordinator who helps bring this podcast to you each week along with publishing our blog and managing our social media presence. Okay, Rachel, take it away.

Rachel Large: Thanks, Al. I am so excited to be here today. Welcome, everyone, to our podcast.

Al: Wow! This is different, I'll have to say. I can tell you, it's a lot easier to do the interviewing than it is to be interviewed. I'm anxious to see how this goes! Rachel, I have a question for you. People want to know, "What's it like to work at the Best Christian Workplaces Institute?"

Rachel: Well, Al, I can tell you from experience that you and the leadership team at BCWI really do practice what you preach. This *is* the best Christian workplace, and I'm not just saying that because my boss is the one asking the question. For our listeners, I've been serving with BCWI for just over a year, and it has been such a blessing.

We're a virtual team. I don't know how many of our listeners know that. I'm in Atlanta, and, Al, you are in the Seattle area. We have team members in southern California and the Washington, DC, area. We're kind of dispersed all over the country, which can have its own set of challenges.

I think one of the things that's really unique about our team is how united we all feel around our mission to help Christian organizations create really healthy and thriving workplaces. I think that's something that gets each of us out of bed in the morning. Even though we're all in different places, that really helps us feel like we're one big team.

Another thing I love about working here is the amount of trust you put in each of our team members to move things forward in our area of expertise. I think there's just such a great balance between direction and guidance from you and the team on how to move things forward from a visionary standpoint, but then you also give us a ton of autonomy and trust to do what we do best with our skills and talents. I think that's a big reason why we've been able to move things forward so quickly in the last few years and make such a great impact with all these organizations we're blessed to serve.

For me personally, I feel like my work is valued, I'm appreciated, and I'm contributing to a greater cause. I feel respected as a professional and as a person. Most of all, I just love that our faith can be such a central part of our work every day. I mean, for me, it's just been a total blessing to be part of this organization, part of this team.

Al: Thanks, Rachel. You know I feel the same about you. What a great contribution you've made, and we're going to talk about that in a minute.

Rachel: Yeah, for sure. I think, like we're going to talk about today, trust is just the central piece of why our team, as remote as we are, is able to work together because there's just that base level of trust that permeates everything and allows everybody to pull their weight on the team. Let's talk a little bit about why that's so important. But, first, tell us a little bit about what's new at BCWI. What are some current events you can tell us about?

Al: These are exciting times. Last June 30 was our fiscal year end, and we had another record year as we seek to help Christian workplaces set the standard as the best, most effective places to work in the world. For example, last year we surveyed 36,000 employees in Christian organizations. We saw our activity increase substantially in that area.

In fact, we're pleased to say we certified 128 different ministries (churches, parachurch, mission organizations, colleges, universities, book publishers) in total out of 252 organizations. That's just over 50 percent of the organizations that survey with us are certified. That also says it's not a really easy slam-dunk to be certified as a best Christian workplace.

One thing we've really enjoyed and I've enjoyed personally is the work we've seen with this podcast. We've seen our downloads (thanks largely to you, Rachel) triple since we started this last November. This has been a real pleasure as we seek to inspire leaders to do the work that's necessary to become a best Christian workplace. We've heard over and over again from people who have listened, "This is helpful," and that gives me great joy.

Rachel: One of the things I've loved in editing and listening to each of these podcasts every week is just hearing the stories. Christian leaders here are doing such great things, and to be able to capture those stories and help share them… What great examples these leaders are for everybody in the Christian workplace on how to treat you staff, how to make the most of all their gifts and talents that they can do great things in the world.

Al: Also, you know, as we talk about Christian leaders, our focus has been clearly on Christian, non-profit, parachurch, mission organizations, and churches. Over this last year, we've also seen this

expand to a number of Christian-owned businesses. We are also really thankful to be a part of inspiring Christian-owned business leaders in this process. Yeah, that's been a fun expansion of our mission and ministry as well.

Rachel: Al, we've talked a little bit about how BCWI got started in our previous episode, and I'll post a link to that in the show notes page in case anyone wants to go back and listen to that. As you settled into your work at the Best Christian Workplaces Institute 13 years ago now, what was one of the first things that surprised you with the results?

Al: Well, as you know, Rachel, I had done thousands of "best companies to work for" surveys here in Washington and Oregon with the statewide business magazines. After a couple of years when we did the Best Christian Workplace survey, I went back, and I looked at some of the results and how Christian organizations did in comparison with secular "best company" kinds of organizations.

I found out there were two questions that received lower scores in Christian organizations. The first one didn't surprise me. It was about merit pay and how people received pay increases based on performance. That didn't surprise me. It *disappointed* me, but it didn't *surprise* me. The one that surprised me is our question, "Rate the question, 'There's a high level of trust between senior leaders and staff in my organization.'" That question in Christian organizations scores lower than secular workplaces.

Rachel: Why do you think that is, Al? Why were trust scores lower in Christian organizations between senior leaders and staff than secular ones?

Al: At first I thought, "Is it because they're less trustworthy than secular leaders?" I look back at my own experience and, no, I didn't think that was it. I've really come to believe the expectations we have on Christian leaders is higher. Because that expectation is higher, we expect trust to be higher, but it isn't. It actually is lower. That's one of the things we hope to improve through our work.

For example, I had a boss in my previous job. He was an alcoholic. He didn't treat women right. He was completely numbers focused, harsh, and heavy-handed. He was unjust in the way he managed in the workplace. That was not my favorite boss, that's for sure. I had kind of said, "Well, that's just the luck of the draw. Well, he is not a good manager." He ended up being actually terminated, but it was several years I was working for this guy.

In a Christian organization, we wouldn't put up with that. I think that's what the difference is. That's an example of just how our expectations are higher. The average score on that question, "There are high levels of trust between leaders and staff in my organization" is a 3.64 in parachurch organizations. It's very similar in the church world as well.

A 3.64. Think about it. That's somewhere between *neutral* and *agree*. *Neutral* is a 3.0. A 4.0 would be *agree*. We're just over halfway between *neutral* and *agree* on this question. In the Christian world, I'd like that score to be a 4.0 where, in general, on average, people agree that there is a high level of trust between leaders and staff in Christian organizations.

Rachel: Before we get into how to get that average trust score up, let's start with this. How do you define trust?

Al: First of all, the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of *trust* is "to believe that someone or something is reliable, good, honest, effective, etc." That's the short definition. I kind of like that. Reliable, good, honest, and effective. That's what Webster says, but one of my favorite books on this topic is *The SPEED of Trust* by Stephen M.R. Covey. He describes trust in an even more practical way. He simply says, "…trust means confidence. The opposite of trust—distrust—is suspicion."

We know in organizations what that's like. When you trust people, you have confidence in them, in their integrity and their abilities. When you distrust people, you are suspicious of them, of their integrity, of their agenda, of their capabilities, or even of their track record. It's that simple, Covey says. *Trust* is a feeling one person has for another person's capability and reliability supported by past actions.

How can we predict future actions? Well, you know, we'll have trust based on their past actions in many cases. The main type of a trust relationship that we deal with at BCWI is between the leader and the staff in an organization. That's where we really measure trust because that's where the rubber meets the road. It's between the leader and the staff in an organization.

Rachel: Then why is having trust so important?

Al: I love Drucker's statement: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." I think in this case, culture is partially defined, or a foundational element of culture is trust. Covey creates a very compelling image when he describes the importance of trust in organizations. He makes it into a simple formula. Higher trust equals greater speed at a lower cost.

That's what we often want to make additional impact in our organizations. We know we need to act faster and at lower cost. Increased trust amongst coworkers produces increased speed of efficiency and decreases the cost because they're able to do more things in a shorter period of time.

Now the opposite of that is also true. Low trust means things go slower, and that drives the cost up. In an environment where there is little or no trust amongst coworkers, that leads to a decrease in the speed of efficiency and, therefore, an increase in cost. Less gets done, and it costs more to get things done.

I think of a recent example in an organization we worked with that had a significant trust problem. During their leadership team meetings, progress and change had been slow because one team member accused another of skewing the results in their department to make the department look better. That team really had to focus their attention on proving they hadn't done something wrong in that hostile environment.

Instead, if they had a high level of trust, they would've gone right past that. They would've trusted each other, and they would've gotten to the end a lot quicker. This never would've happened in an

environment based on trust, and it hampers productivity, as you can see. You know, we all have examples of that based on our own experience.

Rachel: Yeah, the first little equation you were talking about (increased trust equals greater speed at a decreased cost), I can see that being true in our organization just because you trust our team to make decisions and move things forward. Therefore, we can do things at a greater efficiency. I can see the truth in that statement for sure.

Al: Yeah, absolutely.

Rachel: All right. What are the three key elements or steps to building trust?

Al: A guy named Robert Shaw wrote a book *Trust in the Balance*. Owen Hendricks, a Christian consultant, introduced me to that book many years ago. He describes three elements to creating trust.

Now the second book I'd recommend is *Trust Works! Four Keys to Building Lasting Relationships*. That's a book Ken Blanchard coauthored with Cynthia Olmstead and Martha Lawrence. It's a classic Blanchard book that really describes trust in very simple, meaningful, and memorable terms.

The third is Patrick Lencioni's *5 Dysfunctions of a Team*. We all know in the *5 Dysfunctions of a Team*, the first baseline element of that is trust. You have to have trust. That allows you to have meaningful conflict to make things even better. That's the third resource. What are the key elements there? There are three or four, depending on how you define them.

The first is leaders *achieve results and follow through on commitments*. In order to earn organizational trust, a leader needs to fulfill their obligations and commitments. Promises and good intentions are not good enough, and trust requires competent performance that fulfills expectations. Staff, you know, followers, look to leaders to be able to get things done through others. Promises and good intentions are not good enough. Trust requires competent performance that fulfills expectations.

What I find in Christian organizations is we need to, first of all, have faith at the core of our purpose, but then at the same time, we need to have not only character and faith but also competence in being able to get things done. Here's just a personal example. I have a friend. We talk regularly. He lives pretty far away from me. I have moved across the country to Seattle.

Every time we get on the phone, he says, "You know, I'd love to come out and see you." Every time I say, "We'd love to have you. Just come on. Just let us know!" Well, four times we've talked about this (even made plans), and all four times it's fallen through. In reality when he says that, I don't trust that he is actually going to do what he says. His intention is there and I know he wants to come, but I don't actually trust that he is going to come. From that standpoint, his track record is tarnished.

Also another example is leaders make budgets, or we have plans. If we have a track record of making plans but not being able to achieve them, our track record is tarnished. That's really important. The same is true in organizations, though. The track record of achieving results and following through to them is crucial.

Another organization we worked with, for example, had trouble with this. One of their core values was they've stated they value and intentionally cultivate diversity. However, they let their diversity recruiter go with no replacement plans. Their actions didn't really meet their commitment, and as a result, that clearly dinged trust from their standpoint.

Rachel: All right. So what is the second key element to trust?

Al: Other than achieve results and follow through on our commitments, the second one is to *cultivate integrity*. I think of Micah 6:8. What does God expect of us? Well, the first thing he expects is integrity. This requires being consistent and whole in the way we do things. At first blush, you'd think achieving results and integrity look the same, but both are about lining up our actions with words. But integrity encompasses and surpasses achieving results.

The key to integrity is consistent honesty and of transparency in actions regarding everything a person or an organization does. Integrity is a characteristic that really inspires trust. It's consistently honest in actions regarding everything a person or an organization does.

For example, at Compassion Canada, there's a great leader there for a long time now, Barry Slauenwhite, who has very intentionally created a culture of integrity by casting a vision for Compassion Canada's culture and reinforcing and enforcing it relentlessly. He describes trustworthiness and demands it from his employees. Part of their culture of trust is his attitude toward mistakes.

As Bill Hybels has said, the top leader is really the one responsible for the culture, and that's true when it comes to trust. Barry encourages employees to take initiative and recognize that someone's ideas might flop, but there at Compassion Canada, people aren't afraid to make or take responsibility for mistakes. Mistakes are, as we know, crucial to growth. Barry can point to progress in his ministry because they have learned from their mistakes where they actually allow an environment where mistakes are okay because we learn from them.

You know, another key to integrity is transparency in communication. You know, we see where that fails over and over again in our survey results. We toot the horn of communication repeatedly because it's so essential to the health and vitality of an organization. As I think about it, here are a few tips for trust-building communication.

That is, first of all, to keep employees informed right away. You know, as soon as there's a whiff of something coming down the pipeline, employees need to know about it. Oftentimes leaders will sit back in a room and just think about, "Okay, we have this issue. How are we going to communicate it?" But getting it out there in a timely basis is really important.

Secondly is to keep the communication going both ways. Collect feedback at monthly meetings, for example, or have department heads collect suggestions and ideas from their people and have that fed up to the organization and talk about and have leaders really address topics that are on people's minds at the time.

Kind of like the first one, where we want to have people informed right away, we need to eliminate spin. I hear this time and time again in focus groups. "Our leaders just spin everything, so I'm not sure what to believe." Employees smell it a mile away, and as a result, they don't trust what leaders are saying. Rather than having a spin or, "How do we say this so employees will accept it?" get it out there. Don't spin it. That really causes problems.

All of this communication allows employees the freedom to voice their opinions and to see that their ideas are being acted on. This creates a strong sense of trust in the organization and allows for increased productivity. That's the second one, and that is integrity. You know, the organization through their leaders need to reflect integrity.

Rachel: All right. So we have *achieve results*. We have *cultivate integrity*. What's our third key?

Al: You know, the third one is to *demonstrate concern*. This should be particularly true for Christian organizations. Another way to describe that is maybe just respecting the well-being of others. You know, when we look at the image of Christ as the best role model for leadership of all time, we see he loved others. In fact, that's the mark of a Christian, when you think of it, as Francis Schaeffer wrote in his book, *The Mark of the Christian*: the way we love one another.

Employees need to develop positive relationships with their coworkers and their superiors. That's really one thing that differentiates Christian organizations: the quality of their relationships among the team, among the coworkers, and their leaders. Employees must have faith that people they trust are taking their best interest to heart. Leaders especially need to express care and concern for the individual employee, for their independent work the group is doing, and for the organization as a whole.

Leadership has a large responsibility to make sure everyone feels genuinely valued. You mentioned this earlier. It's something that I really work on, and that is not micromanaging. Trust goes both ways. You know, it goes up from a leader's perspective, but from a leadership perspective to the staff, micromanaging is a way of really destroying trust and having people feel like they're not being trusted.

We have to believe employees are not mindless automatons. Leaders have a responsibility to make sure they feel genuinely cared for. That's a key. You know, going back to Compassion Canada and Barry Slauenwhite as an example, he meets one-on-one with each member of his leadership team once a month over coffee or lunch. They just talk about personal lives. Nothing around the ministry is on the agenda. It might come up, but he is really intentionally developing relationships.

Then they move on to business once that's covered, and it provides stronger accountability. Often staff does not see their leaders on a regular basis, and as a result, it's easy for staff to feel that leaders don't care about them individually. Personal touch. You know, it's a key part to individual relationships. It's important for trust to thrive throughout the organization.

Another organization we do work with is Gateway Church in the Dallas area. It has the largest staff of any church I know, and they have something like 35,000 weekend attendees. Every manager at Gateway has the responsibility with at least two or three questions on their agenda to meet with their

staff every week if not every other week. Those one-on-ones on a regular basis really help to demonstrate concern.

Another way people express concern, at Joni and Friends, President Doug Mazza handwrites thank-you notes, congratulatory cards, and birthday cards. He wants every employee to feel like they are treated with dignity and that they are made in the image of God. I mean, these are ways people just continually demonstrate concern. Demonstrate concern is the third one.

You know, I mentioned Ken Blanchard's model in his book *Trust Works*. Let me just mention he has the ABCD model. It's a little different, but you can see how it integrates. *A* stands for *able*. Are you able to do your work? *B* is *believable*. That's the integrity. Do you act with integrity? *Connected* is very similar to our step three *concern*. Do you care about others? Then *dependable*. Are you able to maintain reliability? That's another great model to look at trust in the workplace.

Rachel: Yeah, that's great. I think this is all such good information. These are things that are not difficult. It's not like these big, difficult strategies you need. It's just treating people with respect. You've given so many great, just little, simple tactics to help build trust. You must have a favorite story of how building trust took hold and began to reshape and improve a culture.

Al: Well, yeah. Thanks, Rachel. I do actually. I remember when we did our first staff engagement survey at Willow Creek Community Church. Bill Hybels was just coming back to his operational role as senior pastor after having been with the association for several years and doing a lot of traveling and teaching other pastors.

He came back, and it was right in the heart of our financial recession. He had a lot to think about and to do right off the bat. Well, after the survey, we did focus groups, and it came up that Bill was visible from the platform, but several hadn't really had a chance to even meet him or interact with him. This really caused there to be a gap in trust.

There's an old saying, "If I don't know him, I can't trust him." This impacted the trust, and it again was really easy to bridge that gap. One of the activities they orchestrated (and Colby Burke, their HR director, coordinated this) was to set up lunch sessions with Bill in his office with each of his departments over a period of several months.

After six or eight months, every person in the church had actually met with Bill (there were 350 or so staff at the time) on a personal basis in a small group, and they basically asked two simple questions. One was, "What's a work blessing?" Another was, "What's a family blessing?" Those were very positive sessions where people got to see Bill in a small group setting and interact with him.

You know, that's so true for any leader. Oftentimes I do 360 Review coaching, and we talk about chemistry and leadership from that perspective. For leaders to get out of their office and to walk around to just be visible and to know their staff is an important part in building trust.

Rachel: That's such a great story. Okay, so we've talked about what trust is and how to build it, but I'd love to know a little bit more about why it's so important. Can you share with us some of the significant outcomes or results of having a trust-based culture?

Al: The first thing I think about comes from Patrick Lencioni, and that is to have a cohesive leadership team that trusts one another. I believe, as Patrick writes and has written in *The Advantage* as well as the *5 Dysfunctions of a Team*, a cohesive leadership team is really the most important thing any organization can have. Having trust as a foundation is the basis for fantastic results in any organization.

You know, the second thing I've thought about is the importance of highly functioning relationships inside an organization. I mean, just think about when you have good, positive relationships. It just causes things to go better where you're going to get better results. Teams are going to be working more effectively. You don't have silos. Having those positive relationships is going to make things go better.

The third is outstanding outcomes come because people do work together. They are able to achieve results from a team rather than protecting themselves. That comes back again in my secular work experience. As I was leading groups of people, I would describe one of our core values was having a jerk-free environment. I just didn't feel like I could say and get the attention we wanted and the respect just saying, "Well, we want to have an environment of love and respect." This was a secular workplace.

To get that point across, we said, "Yeah, we want to have a jerk-free environment." We did focus on making sure we didn't have jerks working with us, and that enabled us to really focus on our customers and the work we were doing, the purpose we were there for, rather than… People protecting themselves with politics and other things inside the organization was just a waste of time. When people have good relationships, the results are always better.

Rachel: So, Al, when you stand back and look at our work with all types of clients over the years, what is the best thing trust can do to improve the health of a culture?

Al: Well, we've found it's often trust that is the foundation for creating a flourishing culture where people want to come to work and work together to be part of something even bigger than themselves, to really make a difference in people's lives. I've heard it this way, where the level of trust is like a mirror in a sense on the relationships.

When there are really strong relationships in a Christian setting, that attracts others to the faith. I think that's the bottom line. Can we create an environment with the disciplines and the practices and the outcomes of having Christ in our hearts? That should be attractive to others. Trust is really part of the foundation of that.

Rachel: For sure! I think that's one thing that just really sets Christian workplaces apart from the secular workforce. It's just the ability to have those Christlike attitudes and characteristics and the importance that brings to the Christian workplace.

Al: Yeah.

Rachel: All right. Well, thank you so much for sharing all this with us today, Al. I certainly have learned a thing or two today. I've learned it's a challenge to have high trust levels throughout an organization, especially in Christian organizations, but when we can adhere to those Christian principles and just make the commitment to building trust in an organization, it can be done.

Just to recap, the strategy for building trust is, first, achieving results and following through on commitments. Second is cultivating integrity (saying what you mean, meaning what you say, and following through with your actions). Then third is demonstrating care and concern at a personal level for each of your employees both in their work life and their home life.

I really believe these three things combined will build trust over the long term and help teams be more productive, which as we were discussing ultimately leads to greater ministry impact for organizations. Al, give us one final thought you'd like to leave with ministry leaders.

Al: Well, my final thought is this. That is, leaders, I'd like you to have the courage to actually reflect on trust and actually measure what the level of trust is in your organization. What is the level of the health of the culture in your organization?

Then have the courage to actually take that information in and digest it and analyze it and work on improving it, because I believe high levels of trust with having a cohesive senior leadership team, your organization is going to be so much more effective in accomplishing the vision and mission, even the values, you have. Please take the courage and evaluate where you are with this and work to determine and improve the level of health. It's going to improve your organization's effectiveness.

Rachel: Yes. That is great. Okay, well, thank you so much, Al, for sharing your wisdom, insights, and stories with us today. Thank you for extending your ministry through BCWI to the leaders who have been listening and benefiting from all you shared with us today.

Well, my friends, remember your leadership is a gift. Let's work together to be 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.