The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series
“A Healthy Life Balance: Does It Matter?”
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Dave Ferguson

Male: Welcome to the Flourishing Culture Podcast, brought to you by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, helping Christian organizations set the standard as the best, most effective places to work in the world.

This is the podcast where you’ll learn how to build a flourishing workplace culture that can take your organization to the next level. In the next few minutes, you’ll hear practical insights to create employee engagement that drives the effectiveness and impact of your organization, your church, or your company. Now here’s your host, BCWI president, Al Lopus.

Al Lopus: Hello, and thanks for joining us today. I’m often asked by leaders, “If we work hard to change the health of our staff culture, how much improvement can we expect to see in a year?” Today I want you to meet a lead pastor of a church with over 100 staff who, together with his leadership team, moved their culture from a critical moment status to a healthy level with a significant jump of 22 points.

Today we have the pleasure of talking with Dave Ferguson, the lead pastor of Community Christian Church in Naperville, Illinois, with 10 locations in the Chicagoland area. Dave is the author of five books, including Finding Your Way Back to God and now a new book, Starting Over. Hi, Dave, and welcome to our podcast today.

Dave Ferguson: Hi, Al. How are you doing?

Al: I’m doing great. Thanks. Well, first let’s start off and tell us a little bit about yourself and Community Christian Church.

Dave: Sure. It’s been awhile now, but my brother, Jon, several friends, and I just right out of college moved back to the Chicago area about 25 years ago. We decided we wanted to plant a church. We wanted that church to be all about helping people find their way back to God. That’s our mission.
statement, and God has been (I don’t know how else to put it) just tremendously kind, tremendously gracious to us.

Like you mentioned, we have 10 locations, and we’re getting ready to start our eleventh location in the Chicagoland area. More than 10,000 people probably call Community their church home, and we’ve been able to also launch a church planting network called NewThing, which I just came from that meeting. We now have more than 1,100 reproducing churches in that. I’ll tell you what, I absolutely just love it.

Al: We certainly enjoyed talking with you as we worked through your staff survey engagement results and found you had a really great vibe amongst your leadership team. We could tell that you’re really cohesive. As you settled into your role and as you began building the church in the various locations, what was the key need or challenge you were facing as a church? What were you trying to seek to achieve?

Dave: When we first started, I mean, when you have just five friends and you’re right out of college, you’re just hoping you can collect a few people. You’re trying to survive, you know, pull together some resources. Of course, you have this big dream, but really we go way back. It was just prior to our first service we kind of laid out a three-fold vision we had that really kind of formed our strategy that we’ve gone after ever since.

We said, phase one, we wanted to be an impact church. We wanted to be a church that was going to make an impact, so much so that even if our church was removed from that neighborhood, the people who don’t go to church would say, “We need that church.” Then phase two we said we wanted to be not just an impact church but a reproducing church. We primarily thought of it not in terms of multisite when we first started but in terms of church planting. We wanted to reproduce it over and over again.

Then, finally, a third phase was if God would really bless it the way we saw the New Testament church, we could be a movement, a catalyst for a movement. We’ve just kind of continued to pursue, “What does it mean for us to make an impact and to reproduce and this Acts vision of being a movement?”

Al: How long has it been since you started?

Dave: A little over 25 years now.

Al: Twenty-five years! Yeah. From startup from some friends right out of college to about a year ago, you conducted your first Best Christian Workplace Survey. At this point, how did the survey give you a perspective on your employee engagement, and how did it really help your leadership team at that point?

Dave: I think one of the things that was particularly beneficial for me… When I think of StrengthsFinder tests, one of my strengths is futuristic, but the other one is positivity. I tend to see everything as, “Oh man, that’s awesome. It’s the best.” I think, candidly, one of the great things about doing the survey was it made, I think, our whole lead team more realistic.
You know, “Hey, there are some really, really good things here, but there are some things that aren’t great. Here are some things we really need to go to work on.” It kind of concretized those things. What can be a strength (this idea of positivity that inspires people) can also be a weakness where you kind of live in a little bit of denial. I think it kind of snapped some of that and said, “No. Here are some things we need to go to work on.” That was very, very, very helpful.

Al: Yeah. You really did dig into it. As I recall even as you were looking at the data the first time with your leadership team as we were zooming in on video conference, you were really engaged with the data. When you look back after you looked at the data and we had our discussion, what were three or four of the key learnings or takeaways you took from that early survey?

Dave: Well, one of the things I loved about working with you, Al, too was both kind of clear (like you said) takeaways but also metrics. Our whole staff came. Especially our lead team is pretty competitive, so it kind of gave us, “Okay, here’s where we are, and here’s where we want to go.”

For me, some of the clear takeaways... A few things we celebrated are... One of our strengths at Community was there’s a clear consensus on the goals. We were very much mission-driven, so one of the things we thought was a strength was a strength. We were very excited about that. Also another strength was our high levels of trust. When you couple very mission-focused and high levels of trust, you can get a lot done. Then also it was good to see that even though we’re 25 years into it, innovation was still right at the top of our things that were strengths.

Some other takeaways were things we needed to work on. One of the key things we took very seriously that came back as a challenge or an opportunity for growth was life balance. As a team, we work really hard. We love the mission. We’re passionate about it. But things (as far as balance) tend to get way out of balance and out of control. We needed to do something about that.

Something else we worked on was the staff came back and said, “It doesn’t feel like we’re being compensated for the job we do in a commensurate way to what other people across the country are.” So pay was another one. One of the most surprising ones, though, I think, that came back as a weakness (which is one of those things I kind of had like an, “Oh, I didn’t realize that,” kind of broke some of the denial and positivity) was, “We don’t receive enough feedback on our progress.”

It’s a very relational culture, and I think we mistook deep, real friendships or relationships and having fun with actually giving candid, solid feedback about, “Hey, here’s where you need to improve.” Those were really very helpful.

Al: Yeah, that is interesting. You really got some confirmation and then a couple of things to work on.

Dave: And some things that were surprises. But that was part of the benefit of it.

Al: Yeah. After you got that feedback, and again, we talked at the beginning, you made some great improvements in a year. How did you go about trying to reshape or improve some of these things that surprised you, were areas you could work on?
Dave: Well, we really did. We met with you, and we very much engaged the data. One of the things we decided to do was we presented the whole thing to our staff team and said, “Hey, here’s...” I mean, you give us so much data, which I love. We didn’t give them all that but, “Here are the things that were the top strengths, and here are the things that were at the bottom that we need to go to work on.”

We had a very honest, candid conversation. I would encourage your listeners if they haven’t engaged with BCWI that this is one of the great things. Maybe you go into it fearful like, “Wow. We’re going to tell them the whole truth about this?” But in telling them the truth about it, you actually garner their trust and their support and an enthusiasm about working on that together. That was what we found.

Now some of the things we did, like in regard to life balance, for example... I love what I do. I sometimes call it recess because it doesn’t feel like I’m going to work. I never am like going, “What have I done?” But it’s great to be able to work in your area of passion. It can become a toxic thing for your whole staff if they don’t have some boundaries. One of the things we did and began to stress was (imagine this) a biblical idea of a sabbath.

Al: There you go! What an idea!

Dave: Yeah! How about that? The Bible is practical. We did. In some of our all-staff meetings, we taught them that. We had one couple in particular who had some unique ways they actually lived out the Sabbath. We had them kind of tell their story as a positive example and role model.

Another thing we did too that was kind of creative (and maybe this will encourage some of your listeners if that’s something they’re working on in their staff) is we actually decided we were going to pay our staff team to take vacations. By that I mean, of course you already get paid vacations, but if you would take your vacation and not do any email and not do any text, not do any work, for full-time people we said, “We’ll pay you an extra $200. If you come back and you didn’t do any email, any texting, any work, you took a full week off, if you’ll do that, we’ll give you a bonus of $200. You can take your spouse out to eat and have another night out on us.”

It isn’t huge, but it’s enough money that it kind of motivated people. It also set a really strong signal, “We’re serious about this. We want you to take a sabbath, but we also want you to get a vacation where you get refreshed and relaxed, and you actually kind of get away.” I think that has been really, really good for our staff team.

One of the things we discovered too as we kind of began to dig into this, the staff came back and said, “We don’t feel like we’re necessarily being fairly compensated by comparison.” Well, we also started doing our homework on that. Come to find out, I think it was through the Leadership Network, we got some research on compensation and compared. Actually, our staff is being not only fairly compensated but actually being compensated better than many places, but what it was was our benefits.

Our benefits package we give to our staff is just exceptional. I mean, the health benefits where you don’t have to pay in anything and a health savings account where we give full-time people like $4,000,
it’s exceptional. What we hadn’t done is we hadn’t really effectively communicated how much the value of the benefits package when you talk about health, dental, a phone, a laptop, and there are a number of other things we all throw in there. Of course, a matching 401(k), the value of that.

One of the things we started doing is making people more aware. Like on the front page of their compensation, we would list out the whole thing, not just what your pay was, but also, “Here are also the benefits” and what that was worth. “Here’s your total.” We began to make people more aware of that, and actually in making them more aware of that, that also… “Oh, I guess you’re right. That is exceptional, and that is a value.” That was something that really helped. Those are just a couple of things we began to do just strategically.

**Al:** There you are. You’re using one of your key strengths (innovation) and applying that to some of these other areas. I love the idea of, “If you don’t work on your vacation, we’re going to actually pay you a little bonus of $200 (or whatever it is) when you come back. No emails. No texts. You know, really we want you to have a vacation.” Wow! Then sabbath. I love your story about the benefits and how just by communicating the value of your benefits on this total comp statement really was effective. Those are great examples.

**Dave:** Well, thank *you*. You helped make that happen!

**Al:** Well, I appreciate you listening. No, these are really innovative. Over the year, categories such as teamwork, compensation, benefits, communications, and inspirational leadership improved significantly. Which of those improvements when you looked at your second year results really were most important to you personally? Do you remember that experience, that conversation?

**Dave:** Yeah, I do. I think for me two things come to mind. Well, actually I’ll make three comments. First of all, a lot of the things that were strengths stayed strengths. They stayed high and crept even higher. I was really glad to see the idea that they bought into the mission, the vision, and the goals. That’s always been kind of a hallmark of who we are. Those strengths stayed high. I’ve also been very encouraged... How many different factors are there? Like 60?

**Al:** There are 58. Yeah.

**Dave:** Fifty-eight. Of the 58, I think 56 of ours went up. The fact that almost everything improved also said, “Okay, we are really trending in the right direction.” I mean, honestly the one I felt the best about is probably the work-life balance stuff because ultimately what that means... You know, we have a young staff, a lot of young families. I think for me, my kids are a little older now. They’re late teens and early twenties.

When I would cheat, I would cheat on the front end. I would get up really early in the morning, have an early morning breakfast, but I would always be home in the evening. While I did work really, really hard and loved it, I think I found kind of creative ways to do it. I think for me to expect my whole staff to kind of be able to maneuver their schedule the way I did and put in that many hours and still have a satisfactory family life was unrealistic.
I think the changes we made with this... Our campus pastors, our staff team, and those people, we've given them every chance they can to have a really great marriage. Their kids grew up in the church loving the church, loving the fact that their parents worked at a church. They feel it’s like an honor to be a part of it, and it’s not something that took away their mom or took away their dad. I think that was the thing so far I’ve been like, “Okay, that’s a big, big deal.”

Al: That is a big deal. Yeah! As you say, that impacts not only your family but the way others see you. You become a real witness in that regard. That’s great. How about from a ministry outcome standpoint, Dave? You know, what did you see in terms of what was happening in your workplace culture?

Dave: One outcome I can think of is I think the staff feel more valued overall by us acknowledging, “Hey, we want you to be whole people. We want you to find a balance in work and life.” Even making the awareness of, “No, here’s where we are really trying to fairly compensate you.” Actually there were some occasions we took a look at some people who we did need to bump their pay. As a result of this experience, we did bump their pay. I think those things made the staff feel more valued.

I think another ministry outcome that comes to mind was there was a definite increase in trust. I mean, I teach this other places when I’m working with church leaders. When you have mission and trust, I mean, that is a great combination, because you have a clear mission, and you have a whole bunch of people who trust each other.

I mean, you can go really hard all in the same direction because you’re not looking over your shoulder to see if that guy is stabbing you in the back. You’re not looking to the side to see what the other person is doing. No, all of you are face-forward, right toward that goal, toward that mission. I think increased trust that came as a result of this just created a greater momentum for us.

I don’t know if there’s a direct correlation or not. You can decide. Our mission is to help people find their way back to God. We had more baptisms in 2016 than we’ve ever had in the history of our church. I think some of those things definitely helped.

Al: Yeah. Wow. That’s why we do what we do. That’s a great example.

Dave: That’s exactly right!

Al: Yeah, more baptisms. Yet people felt like they had a better work-life balance all at the same time. Yeah.

Dave: Well, I mean, if you think about it, though, Al, don’t you think...? For the church to advance the way God meant for it to, it has to also mean we’re doing life the way God meant for us to do. We shouldn’t have to kill ourselves or wreck our bodies or wreck our marriages to have the church be the way God meant for it to be. You know, it all comes together.

Al: He wants us all to flourish. That’s for sure. Yeah.

Dave: That’s right.
Al: When you stand back, with all that’s happened, all these changes, what’s the best improvement you’ve seen in your culture?

Dave: I think some of the things I’ve mentioned. I think our staff feels valued, our staff feels like they’re trusted, and also I’d say as a lead team it just feels like, because they’ve been empowered to do that and us having these conversations with them I think just gives us even more flexibility to kind of do what God wants us to do. It’s been a really positive thing.

Al: This is just great to hear what’s happened at your church. I really want to thank you for being with us today. It’s really been fun to hear how you started off with a couple of college friends and started a church. Twenty-five years later, you have 10, almost 11, campuses across Chicagoland, over 100 staff. You’re really at a point where your staff feels, as you said, valued, trusted, and empowered. The result of that is even more impact in ministry. That’s a great story.

Dave, I bet you have one final thought. I’d love to hear one final thought you could leave with us. What would you leave with ministry leaders today?

Dave: We’ve kind of touched on it a little bit, Al, but I think just always remember that as leaders, you reproduce who you are. I think these kinds of things where you pause and assess how you’re doing gives you an honest, candid look at, yeah, how your church culture is doing but also probably a candid look at how you’re doing. You’re going to discover there are some strengths God wants to use and, hey, keep using them.

There are also growth opportunities. There are probably some things you need to change. Let’s change those things. Why? Because you’re going to reproduce who you are. Without pausing to take whatever kind of assessment (and I highly recommend BCWI), you’re going to keep perpetuating the same stuff.

For us, I think it was. It was a great time for us to just kind of pause and go, “Okay, how are we doing? Where are we winning? Where are the strengths? Okay, now what stuff do we have to go to work on? Let’s go to work on it.” We were able to lead in a different direction, and I think it made a big difference.

Al: Yeah, I love that saying, “We reproduce who we are.” Wow! That’s very good. Thank you, Dave Ferguson, lead pastor of Community Christian Church in Naperville, Illinois, for sharing your wisdom, insights, and stories. Thank you for extending your ministry to the leaders who are listening today.

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