



**The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series**  
“How to Take a Healthy Culture to the Next Level”  
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Paul MacDonald

**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:** Hi, everyone, and thanks for joining us today! Every once in a while, we run across an organizational leader who has helped to create such a remarkably flourishing culture that we have to ask, “How did your people pull it off?” or, “How did you do it?” I can’t wait to ask this question to our guest today. He has worked incredibly hard to diagnose and improve the organizational health of the school he runs.

As a result, the school you’re going to learn about has already reached the top 10 percentile of comparable organizations from the get-go. We have the pleasure of talking with Paul MacDonald, the headmaster of Crossings Christian School in Oklahoma City. Crossings Christian School’s mission is to partner with parents and the church to develop students into Christ-centered servant leaders who are academically and spiritually prepared for college and life.

In addition to his responsibilities at Crossings, Paul has also shared his experiences in a variety of leadership capacities, including service on the board and the National Accreditation Commission for the Association of Christian Schools International, also known as ACSI. Hi, Paul, and welcome to our podcast.

**Paul MacDonald:** Thanks, Al. It’s a pleasure to be here.

**Al:** We're so glad to have you. I'm looking forward to hearing what you have to share with our listeners about creating a flourishing culture so they might have some ideas how to improve the health of their own culture. First, tell us a little bit about you and your role at the Crossings Christian School.

**Paul:** Well, I accepted the position at the school in the summer of 2011 but didn't assume the role full-time until the following summer because I was under commitment to my previous school, which was celebrating its centennial year. I was committed to completing those celebrations and helping them through a search process before leaving.

**Al:** Yeah, I just heard somebody say, "You're really not successful in a job until you find a successor."

**Paul:** That's right.

**Al:** Yeah. So you did that. Tell us a little bit about the scope and size of the school.

**Paul:** Crossings is currently the largest private school in the Oklahoma City Metro with nearly 1,100 students in grades Pre-K through 12. We were founded a little over 15 years ago, and the school has experienced remarkable growth and built a debt-free \$50 million campus.

**Al:** Wow!

**Paul:** The school is young, but I believe we are rapidly building a reputation of being a really good school. I like to say we're an elite school without being elitist. I say that because I think we serve the God of the universe who models being elite but reached down and came down for us. So he is not an elitist.

**Al:** Well, that's fantastic. Tell me something you really appreciate about your work, how you enjoy what you do.

**Paul:** I guess the thing I would say is the privilege of working with a wonderful board. They are remarkably supportive of our staff and, because of that, we've been able to recruit and retain a remarkable staff. While outwardly our campus facilities are very impressive, our staff is really our greatest asset.

**Al:** Yeah, and the survey really demonstrates that. As you settled into your role about five years ago, what key need, challenge, or opportunity were you facing as a culture? What did you set out to achieve as you started in your role?

**Paul:** When I took over here, the challenge we faced was to build upon a very positive staff and student culture established for over a decade in the lower school and translate that as we added the middle school and the upper school grades.

**Al:** The school started off as a primary school, but then as the students went from one grade to another, you expanded that all the way up through high school. Is that right?

**Paul:** That's right. We're just now kind of finalizing the high school at this point.

**Al:** Yeah, great. You completed the BCWI Engagement Survey, and it revealed just a remarkably flourishing culture. In fact, 87 percent of your staff said they felt engaged in their work. As the hundreds of people who have completed the survey, they look at that engagement number, and they know the average is close to 60 percent in Christian schools. But 87 percent! As you reviewed the survey report that detailed the true health of your culture, what were some of the things you and your leadership team learned from the debriefing process?

**Paul:** Well, we recognized our goal of providing adequate preparation and training time for the staff had been accomplished because they noted that. We also noted the high level of trust and esprit de corps on the staff. It was really encouraging to see the staff has confidence in the integrity of the organization and its people.

**Al:** I noticed as I was looking over your report, it was actually ACSI at the creation of the Best Christian Workplaces that created those custom questions that applied to schools. One of them was the adequate preparation and training time for staff. That's very unique for schools, and that showed up on your top 10. Yeah, that's great. What else came out?

**Paul:** We took note that while we provide a very competitive compensation package for our staff and faculty, we could still be working to improve that. Our board continually expresses their esteem for the staff and just this spring endorsed increasing several aspects of our compensation. We currently provide a salary structure better than the surrounding public schools, which, in my experience, is a rarity in Christian schools.

**Al:** Wow! Your compensation philosophy and practice at this point is to provide compensation that's above or better than the surrounding public schools. That's fantastic. Yeah.

**Paul:** That's the goal at least. That's the goal!

**Al:** That's the goal! All right. Well, behind every organization, such a flourishing culture (and we often say this), there is certainly significant and intentional effort behind creating that culture. These things don't happen by accident. How did you pull it off? You know, that's the question we have. What are a few of the key strategies you put in place at Crossings Christian School that were key to creating this flourishing culture where people just seem to love to come to work and serve at the school?

**Paul:** Well, that's a great question. With the enrollment kind of burgeoning and the addition of the upper school, we recognized the need for a highly competent faculty and highly competent coaches to deliver a comprehensive program of college prep coursework, as well as a well-conceived arts and athletic program.

The steps we took were we recognized we first had to have the right people on the bus in the appropriate seats on the bus, and then recruit the right folks to fill the other seats. We were super intentional in pursuing and retaining the best people and providing the best compensation and work environment possible.

**Al:** Yeah. Best people. Best reward system. That's great. What else did you look at?

**Paul:** Well, we developed that strong program of academic offerings so we now have over a dozen AP classes and the same number of dual credit courses. We also developed a really extensive fine arts and performing arts program and then really strong offerings in the interscholastic sports. At this juncture, we have almost no staff turnover because we have (as you've noted) pretty engaged people in the right seats delivering the mission.

**Al:** Yeah, so right people and really strong academics, fine arts, and sports. What a great strategy. Well, I bet you have another example or another action step that's part of your strategy that really helped to create and even improve the health of your culture over time.

**Paul:** Absolutely! Well, once we got the staff in place (or as we worked to get the staff in place), we recognized the staff needed the appropriate tools and facilities to deliver the mission. While building that team, we also embarked on two separate \$15 million capital campaigns to provide the appropriate classrooms, fine arts, and athletic facilities so that faculty wouldn't be handicapped by our lack of facilities.

**Al:** Wow! What else? It looks like (as I recall) you had a couple of groups that helped with that process.

**Paul:** Yeah. When I first arrived, we put together a committee to first build a middle school facility and then outdoor athletic facilities. After those were completed, we added a second committee to look at some fine arts facilities and a larger indoor athletic facility and embarked on those two capital campaigns, which for all intents and purposes, have completed the physical plan.

**Al:** Wow! How many students are now attending?

**Paul:** We have over a thousand students right now. We're close to 1,100, and we'll reach our capacity when we're around 1,200 students.

**Al:** About 1,200 students. Yeah. The school is how old again, Paul?

**Paul:** It's 15-16 years old. We're almost at capacity. In fact, right now we have a couple hundred on a waiting list to get into grades that are already full.

**Al:** Wow! Yeah! Well, when we look at our flourish model, your scores are certainly consistent across the eight drivers of staff engagement, but three of these drivers really jump out above the others. That's *inspirational leadership*, *outstanding talent*, and *healthy communication*. Paul, on the survey report that reviews this information, your trust levels between leadership and staff are off the charts. That's a tough thing that a lot of our listeners are dealing with. How do you do it? How have you created such an environment where there are high levels of trust between your leadership and staff?

**Paul:** It would have to be that we make every effort to be transparent and honest at every opportunity and also to communicate regularly with all the staff groups. I think this has always been a part of the

DNA of our school going all the way back to the founders. We just try to make certain it continues to be part of the organizational DNA.

**AI:** Yeah. Also, another one of the drivers is *outstanding talent*. At Crossings, you have been able to attract, retain, and promote highly capable employees. Again, just great scores. You've already talked about this a little bit, but what strategy or action steps can you share that has led to such outstanding talent?

**Paul:** Well, as I said before, we were willing to be honest with people who were not necessarily a great organizational fit and bless them to serve the Lord elsewhere and then recruit people who *were* a strong fit. Interestingly, our staff has been some of the best recruiters for new hires, and we've been able to acquire some of the best teachers out there.

**AI:** Yeah. That's a fantastic strategy. Your current staff, because of the experience they have, are actually helping you recruit some of the best people who are out there. That's fantastic. When it comes to healthy communication, your employees feel they're really involved in decisions that affect them. They feel free to voice their opinions. There are good levels of accountability.

All in all, they feel like there's a good balance between their work and life. There's a healthy work/life balance. Again, share with our listeners ways you've encouraged and built healthy communication around some of these areas.

**Paul:** Well, I think the major way we've done that is we've all been an advocate of a relatively flat organizational structure. I try to recognize that I'm just the first among equals. Because we've recruited well, we have a lot of people who are smarter and more competent than I am, and it would be ludicrous not to solicit their participation in the decision-making process. We also acknowledge that for an initiative to succeed, there must be a high level of buy-in by those tasked with delivering the initiative. It's incumbent upon us to engage staff in decisions that affect them.

**AI:** Let me ask you, Paul, on that. It's really great. You're involving your teachers. You're involving your staff. How do you do that? Are there specific ways you can share with us how you involve your people in some of these things?

**Paul:** In the school research right now, professional learning communities are one of the major things that impact positive school culture. We have a lot of those groupings. We have grade-level committees in the lower school and the middle school, and then we have departments in the upper school. We try to disseminate information and then have a strong feedback loop with the staff at every level. The other thing we try to do is we try to survey every constituent group in the school on a regular basis and get their feedback that way as well.

**AI:** Wow! Okay, so people are involved at each grade level, and then at the higher levels, within their departments. You work through that structure. Yeah. That's great. How about all-staff meetings? Those are hard to do in a school setting with classrooms and so on. Do you have all-employee meetings at any time?

**Paul:** Several times a year we do, and we usually start those with some kind of a message from the headmaster that's kind of a rah-rah conversation. We enjoy those times, and I think they also enjoy some time in their individual groupings as well.

**Al:** So it's kind of like group, grade, or department-level kind of meetings. Yeah.

**Paul:** Yeah.

**Al:** Yeah, great. Well, again, healthy communication is just outstanding. Yeah. I can see why. Paul, as we conclude our time, what would you most like to say to fellow Christian leaders about what's meant the most to you having a flourishing culture and how it's impacted the effectiveness of your school?

**Paul:** Well, I guess I'd say, Al, that I try to follow some advice that comes from two of my favorite books at this time. They are Simon Sinek's *Leaders Eat Last* and John Dickson's *Humilitas*. Both books (one intentionally and one not so intentionally) espouse leading the way Jesus did with humble servant leadership. I think if we rely on the grace of God to do that and humbly place others in the organization first, I believe we see our organizations (regardless of the type) produce flourishing people who make up flourishing organizations.

**Al:** Yeah, I've enjoyed both of those books. John Dickson's *Humilitas*... I heard him speak at the Global Leadership Summit a couple of years ago. Is that how you ran across that?

**Paul:** Actually, it was the president of ACSI who gave us a copy of that book. Then I went to the leadership conference and heard him speak as well. The president of ACSI gave a copy to all the board members, and now I've made it a goal to re-read it every year.

**Al:** Wow! Yeah. That's really insightful. Boy, it's been interesting, Paul, just to listen about how important it is to have the right people, for you, the right people on the bus, having strong academic, fine arts, and sports programs, having topnotch facilities, but also to have reward systems in place that really encourage your best performers to recommend other people to come to the school. Those are great things.

Paul, headmaster of Crossings Christian School in Oklahoma City, thank you for being with us today. I've certainly enjoyed what we've learned. I've also really appreciated... The challenge you've had really from the beginning has been just to develop a board and leadership where you've created and God has provided great growth for you but your strategy of really focusing on your people, your facilities, and your academic strength to achieve that.

Again, the results have been great growth and, I'm sure, servant leaders. Again, I just love Christian schools developing tomorrow's Christian leaders for our society. Thanks very much for being with us.

**Paul:** Thank you for having me. It was a pleasure being with you today.

**Al:** To our listeners, thank you for investing this time in your workplace culture today. This is Al Lopus reminding you that a healthy culture drives growing impact and growth in 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](http://blog.bcwinstitute.org). Your feedback is very important. Leave a comment on our blog post or reach out on social media (@BCWInstitute). Also please click over to iTunes and simply rate the Flourishing Culture Podcast. Your help lets us reach more people with the same content you've enjoyed today. While you're there, be sure to click "Subscribe" to get a fresh episode delivered to you each Monday morning.

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