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. Today’s guest leads one of the most respected organizations involved in student ministry on university campuses. Every fall for the last 15 years this organization has measured the health of its staff culture. As a result, the lessons they have learned and the improvements they have made to their culture continue to strengthen their ministry impact. Let’s take a peek inside and see how their action steps and insights can benefit you and your organization.

Today we have the pleasure of visiting with Vince Burens, the new president and CEO for the Coalition for Christian Outreach in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. CCO’s mission is, “Transforming college students to transform the world.” They have been doing that for a long time. He has been a previous podcast guest and actually was one of our first back in 2009. He has been the president at CCO for just over a year, and he is only the third president in probably nearly 50 years of ministry.

Hi, Vince, and welcome to our podcast.

Vince Burens: Hi, Al. It’s great to be with you.

Al: Hey, first congratulations on becoming the third president at CCO. It’s been an inspiring case study to see the planned progress and smooth transition you’ve experienced as you’ve become the chief executive officer. I’m looking forward to talking with you about that and looking forward to having you share to help our listeners create healthy leadership transitions at the CEO level (they don’t always
go as smooth as yours has) and how that has really impacted the culture and how you’ve maintained that flourishing culture you’ve been known for.

First, a little bit about yourself. Tell us about your background to help our audience understand who you are.

**Vince:** Sure! Well, I started working for the CCO in 1999. I was actually an on-campus staff person at a small private college just outside of Pittsburgh. At that time, it was Robert Morris College. Now it’s Robert Morris University. I started there in ‘99 working out of an Anglican church. I did that for about three years and then transitioned into our main office in recruiting. Since that time, I have worked in recruiting and our conference, Jubilee, which many people know more broadly about the CCO. They’ve heard of our conference, Jubilee, that happens every year in February.

I’ve overseen our training program, and for the last seven or eight years previous to becoming the CEO, I was our executive vice president and COO. I used to joke with people that I had the greatest job in the world with the most challenging name. I was the COO of the CCO, so that was always a challenge for people. That’s my work background.

I have been married to Lori for 19 years and have two little girls who are in seventh and third grade. One of the reasons I continue to be passionate about working for the CCO and accepted the call to become the president and CEO a little over a year ago is I do believe the collegiate years are the years where most people figure out who they are and what they want to be about. They begin setting those real patterns in adulthood about living their life for Jesus or not and how that’s going to impact every area of their life. So not just their Sundays but also their Mondays through Saturdays.

That’s the vision and the call of the CCO. It’s to help college students begin that transformation process. Obviously, the Spirit does that. That’s not us, but we’re agents of all of that happening. So any way I can empower churches to reach out to students during their collegiate years, we want to be all about that. That’s the way I wanted to invest my life. That’s why I continue on doing this work.

**AI:** I remember very fondly I lived in Pittsburgh in the 70s and went to a couple of Jubilee conferences. My roommate at the time was a member of a Bible study that was part of a graduate program he participated in. CCO has had a great reputation for a long time and one I have experienced personally. It’s really just a great ministry. Vince, it’s been more than a year since you stepped into this new leadership role. As you’ve settled in, what’s been a key challenge you’ve identified or perhaps even a ministry opportunity? Either way, what’s the big goal before you?

**Vince:** Well, the biggest goal for us right now and the biggest challenge and the biggest ministry opportunity (I guess maybe I’ll lap all of those things together in one) has been something I think we all know to be true but maybe people are feeling and experiencing in a more sort of tangible, urgent way over the last handful of years. That is, when kids who grew up in the church (or maybe they don’t even grow up in the church) get to college, it tends to be a time where they “find themselves.”

Normally what finding one’s self in college means is it means it’s a time of experimentation. It tends to mean it’s a time of walking away from faith and sort of moral roots. As a friend of mine often says,
college is like Las Vegas. Whatever happened in college stays in college. I think what people are realizing is that’s actually not the case anymore.

Yes, people are still experimenting and walking away from moral roots, but the issue they run into now is… The expectation always used to be that at some point, people will get married. They’ll have kids. Because kids need religion, that would draw them back to church, and people would kind of continue on with their faith at that point. Well, churches and many others are experiencing that’s no longer the case. Kids who are growing up in the church are leaving the church when they get to college, and they’re not coming back.

The greatest challenge and ministry opportunity we’re walking into is, as a collegiate ministry that partners with the local church, churches all over the country are now putting their hands up in the air and saying, “We want to take the college years seriously. We don’t want to just leave it to chance and expect they’re going to come back to the faith some day. We really think the collegiate years are integral to people coming to know Jesus and also those who already know him really developing their faith during those collegiate years.”

We’ve had churches, Al, from literally all over the country reaching out to us and saying, “What would it look like for us to have a CCO staff person working out of our church and reaching the college or university we’re most near?”

Al: That’s one of the unique features of CCO (partnering with others, particularly churches), isn’t it? Is that what I recall?

Vince: Yes. Oftentimes people will ask me, “So you compete with these other campus ministries when you go on campus.” I say, “No, actually we don’t. Our ministry is different.” It’s the same in that we do Bible studies, evangelism, a fellowship group, and all those kind of things, but the key distinctive is our staff is always on staff at a local church. They’re actually a staff person of the local church who we place there who does collegiate ministry. That is our distinctive.

Al: As I recall, Vince, you’ve been involved in nearly every one of the 15 Employee Engagement Surveys you’ve done over the years at CCO. I heard you and CCO’s current board chair, Dan Dupee, describe a couple of significant benefits you’ve experienced by using the survey and doing it year after year for 15 years. Tell us about that.

Vince: Sure! I’m not just saying this because I’m doing a podcast for you, Al. We literally would not be where we are today without the Best Christian Workplace Survey, the Employee Engagement efforts you have made, and the results from the survey have given us. When we first started working with you all back in 2003… Wow! Time flies!

Yeah, when we first started working together, you did a survey of the organization. What you found was we had a very healthy, thriving culture. However, we were decreasing in the number of staff we had. I remember you saying to me something very provocative. I’m paraphrasing, so if this is more hyperbolic, I apologize. I think I quoted you on it, so hopefully it is what you said.
You said, “Vince, you’re one of the best organizations I’ve ever seen that may be dead in the next five years.” What you meant by that was we were decreasing in our numbers every year, and that was something we were not paying attention to.

**Al:** You know, my point was usually healthy cultures… You had a flourishing culture even back then. Usually they grow as a result. Yeah, I saw you weren’t growing.

**Vince:** Yeah! That was something we, I think, maybe felt but didn’t know in data. Because of your good work and conversations we were able to have, it helped us as an organization. I do mean that broadly. Our staff as well really engaged the fact.

Well, the people here love the organization, love the mission, love the community and fellowship, and love the transformation we’re seeing on college campuses. But there’s something within our culture that’s not bringing more people into it. What is that? How do we identify that? If we do believe in this mission as much as we do, how do we transition to a culture that’s bringing more people in?

Yeah, that’s really one significant example, and we have had many other examples around organizational connection between leadership and staff, the value and function of our training events. There are just many pieces along the way that we’ve been able to pluck out from the survey to then take a focused effort as an organization to figure out, “Okay, how do we grow this to continue to have a thriving culture?”

**Al:** Yeah, and I think we’ll refer to this a little later in our discussion but appropriate at this point. It gives me just great joy to see your organization has doubled in size. There are more than twice as many leaders out proclaiming the gospel, helping people grow in their faith in college. The impact that will have in eternity is just huge. My hat is off to you for that great work. I remember you were just getting into your role, probably as recruiting new staff, at that point.

**Vince:** I was. Yeah.

**Al:** Yeah, but let’s go back to this leadership transition a minute, Vince. You know, your leadership transition has been huge, and I’ve watched it over time. Over the past year, we were thrilled to see your culture continues to maintain its flourishing status. What are some of the key steps you, Dan, the board, the organization took to help create the positive transition you’ve experienced so far? What can you share with our listeners?

**Vince:** Yeah, well a quick anecdotal story connected to that, and then I’ll get into some of the details. Dan had been my direct supervisor for the last seven or eight years. Dan and I had (and have) a very good relationship. When Dan approached me and said he felt like it was nearing a time that the Lord was calling him to transition into a different season of leadership and wanted to know if I would consider walking through a process to be considered to be the next president and CEO, we talked to a lot of friends who knew the organization well.

One of those friends who had been through some leadership transitions in his own personal business said, “You know, Vince, though it’s not, I think you should look at the CCO as a family business
because you are going to be the third president in 46 years. Something you should be aware of is that in family businesses, the third generation is when most businesses fail.” I said, “Wow! Thanks for those words of encouragement! I’m really excited.”

But it was a good reminder to us that even though we had a wonderful transition from our founding president Bob Long to Dan Dupee, we couldn’t just rest on that to think that the transition from Dan to me was going to be simplistic and easy. Some of the things we had put in place early on were very open conversations between Dan and me and between Dan, the board, our executive committee, and me. Just really putting all of this before the Lord. I think we all held it very open in very open hands saying…

The board made an intentional decision originally that they would vet me to be the next president and me alone. If we got to the end of that process and either I decided on my end or they decided on their end that it would not be the right fit, then they would do a much broader search outside the organization.

We just from the beginning had very open conversations about what they felt like my strengths and weaknesses were in moving into that role, what I felt like were my strengths and weaknesses moving into that role, and what I saw the opportunities and the challenges of taking on the position. Dan and I kind of wrote and re-wrote our job descriptions a few times to kind of make an easy transition.

One of the decisions they had made was Dan would transition to the chairman of the board, and that’s a four-year position. I guess he is not officially my supervisor, but the executive committee (which he leads) is my supervisor. They’re my supervisor. It was sort of a four-year up ramping of Dan sort of transitioning his leadership and me moving into that role significantly.

We also confronted the brutal facts, so we asked questions like, “If four years from now this has failed, why will it have failed?” and really said, “Okay, let’s not just walk into this with rose-colored glasses on, but let’s ask the hard questions of where the gaps are going to be and where could we have some misses?”

I’ll tell you, in our example, Dan is an exceptional fundraiser and friendraiser (both). There is obviously a huge question in an organization like ours when you have someone who has been so good at fundraising for so long, to have someone else transition into that role, “Will I be able to raise resources and generate the resources for the organization the way Dan was able to?”

We asked those questions. We recognized probably putting some infrastructure in different places, recognizing that Dan is Dan, and Vince is Vince. So when Dan transitions, to walk into a situation where we would expect me to be Dan would not be wise. The board worked very hard to say, “Let’s set up a job description that makes sense for Vince, not just take Dan’s job description and hand that to Vince.”

AI: Wow! Yeah, and very intentional. That was the first thing that’s pretty obvious. Over time, it was put before God in prayer. You worked through that over time. Again, it’s another outstanding thing.
It’s interesting how you actually then redefined your job descriptions over time. That’s really helpful just recognizing this was a process over time that you took.

Going from that into the executive president role, modifying those roles even over time with Dan as the president, and now the very logical move of Dan stepping into the board chair role as you become the CEO, that makes for a very smooth transition. Yet recognizing you’re different and helping do some things, put some infrastructure in places you say, that reflects your strengths versus what Dan’s might be. Those are great steps, Vince.

Also, I do recall a 360 done on you in this process. Was that a helpful process for you as you began to look at your role and the role of the CEO?

**Vince:** It was incredibly helpful. I would like to believe I’m aware of my strengths and weaknesses, and praise God for the most part I think I am, but it’s always helpful to have a little bit of time to reflect on, “What am I doing well?” and, “Where could I grow?” Not only, “Where can I grow?” but, “Where are places where I can encourage other leaders to step into the places where maybe I’m not as strong and they have incredible strengths and gifting?”

What was most helpful for me in the 360 was, first, to get an honest reflection on my strengths from the things people see, some of the things I didn’t even see that people saw as strengths, but also places where I saw some of the leaders around me and even my board members raising their hands and saying, “You know, Vince, we are really bought into the CCO. We love the vision and mission and what we think God is calling it to, and we would love to step into some of those places where we think you could use help, the organization could use help, and we could build out the future.”

All of those pieces were incredibly helpful to me. Obviously, when you put yourself into a 360 process, you don’t know what you’re going to get. It’s exciting and a little scary. Fortunately, in this one, I had one where Dan, my predecessor who was my supervisor at the time, allowed me to do a 360 about eight or nine years ago where I got some very strong critical feedback. While that hurt to hear, it was also very constructive in future development for me.

While I wouldn’t suggest doing one every few months, I do think that as a leader, it’s important to be put through a process like that for our own development and discipleship. I’m grateful, and I think it’s allowed me to lead reasonably well here over the first year or so of my tenure as president.

**Al:** Yeah, you certainly do get a reflection of how others perceive you. A lot of that is changeable. Yeah, good for you! Let’s move on. You know, you’ve heard the saying, “Culture eats strategy for lunch.” Vince, I recall from a debriefing that you’re looking at a new strategy to expand beyond your traditional geographic area. Give us a snapshot of this new strategy and how the high levels of trust that exist within the CCO between leadership and staff across the organization and healthy communication are so crucial to rolling out this new strategy.

**Vince:** Well, we are in the midst of a strategic planning phase. The genesis of that strategic planning phase is, as we talked about a little earlier, Al, we are a campus ministry that partners with local
churches. We literally take our staff and put them on staff at local churches as they reach out as an arm of that congregation to the local college or university.

Also as we discussed earlier, as colleges and universities and churches that are connected to them are realizing students are leaving the church and not coming back, we have been overwhelmed (literally, in some ways) by the amount of churches all across the country (a few hundred actually) who have said, “Hey, we have seen the ministry of the CCO in a variety of different ways. We would love to see that ministry come to California, Kansas, Minnesota, Florida, and North Carolina.”

Traditionally as you know, we’ve been at a geographic footprint that’s been about seven states in the mid-Atlantic, northeastern part of the US. We’re in a strategy right now where we’re trying to discern the Lord’s will of would he have us doing these national partnerships? We’re doing that hand-in-hand, so we’ve actually begun a few of these partnerships. We have about seven or eight staff right now who are outside of our traditional geographic footprint. As a parallel process to that, we are doing a strategic planning.

To your question around healthy communication and level of trust, we are an organization where buy-in is critical. I don’t know how many organizations are out there where buy-in isn’t critical, but we’re certainly one where buy-in is really critical. Part of this strategic planning process is we have a 14-person committee that’s made up of board members, leadership staff, campus staff. We’ve thought about diversity in all ways…ethnic, gender, amount of experience on staff, kind of college and university they serve, denominational diversity.

That committee is really evaluating all the different areas of the CCO. The question we’re trying to ask is, first, “Is this what God has for us? Is this godly ambition or human ambition? If it’s human ambition, we don’t want to do it.” It’s really the doors God is opening that we want to walk through those doors.

The other question we’re asking is when people say they want CCO, what exactly do they see they want? What is the it when they say, “We want it”? What is the it? I think your statement earlier of, “Culture eats strategy for lunch,” we believe people want the CCO. They want our culture. They want our people. They want our theological perspective. They want our ecclesial perspective. They want all of those things.

Can we define that, and can we replicate it and multiply it? That’s what we’re in the process of doing right now. We’ve just placed some staff in Fresno, in North Carolina, in Memphis, and in Brooklyn, New York. We’re just on the frontend of doing that. We’re beginning to learn, “Okay, what does it look like to replicate CCO culture, CCO people, CCO ministry in these areas where people are no longer within a drive but within a flight.

A big part of who we are is our gathering together (our staff people, who are almost 300 in number right now). One of the things that drives our culture has been our ability to gather together. So we are trying to figure out, “How do we do that within this sort of new playing field we’re walking into? Do we do that virtually?” I think that will be part of it, but I don’t think that can be all of it. Our people need to be together. So we’re trying to figure all of that out as we go right now, but we’re trying to define it so we then, in turn, can find ways to grow it and replicate it.
Al: Yeah, that’s fascinating. As I’ve known your organization now over time, I think the number one top 10 strength is innovation. This is a clear example how you are living into that strength. Also, I know...what? Four times a year at least your staff all congregates together for a couple of days of staff meetings. Geography helps with that. That’s a key part of your culture. So, yeah, analyzing that is going to be very interesting.

Vince: That’s right!

Al: You just mentioned something that really struck my interest. As we look back over the last 15 years, CCO has at least doubled the number of staff as you’ve grown and expanded. You mentioned 300 staff. I remember in 2002, I thought it was more like 80 or 90. Our listeners love practical tips they can use to help build their culture and thus their ministry. What would you say are some of the most valuable, practical steps you’ve implemented over the years to create and sustain this healthy, really even flourishing, culture in the midst of the growth you’ve experienced?

Vince: Well, I think it would have to be really focusing in on the core of our mission and being ruthless in our defense of focusing in on that mission. For us, our mission statement is, “Transforming college students to transform the world.” When we think about who we are and what we do, we are about transforming students. We’re obviously about God’s work and the Holy Spirit’s work in transforming those students.

We often say very quickly, “We’re not the ones doing the transforming; we’re the ones who participate in God’s transformation of these students.” Anything that would distract us from that mission, we very quickly focus on and move away from what is core. As you might imagine as a Christian campus ministry, there are many, many good endeavors that could be put in front of us.

We’ve just very quickly said, “Yes, those are good things, and we may be a part of those things, but ultimately, our focus is always going to be on God’s transformation of college students to transform the world, to be a part of his kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.” One of the ways we’ve done that is years ago (but I still think it’s a little bit timeless) we went through some of the Jim Collins’ Good to Great work, and we defined our Hedgehog and defined the BHAG.

We figured out what we can be the best in the world at. (He dangles that preposition there, so I’ll do it too.) “What can you be the best in the world at?” “What are you most passionate about?” and for social organizations like ours, you ask the question, “What can be your resource engine?” For us, “the best in the world at” is partnership, “most passionate about” is transformation, and our “resource engine” is our people.

The CCO really is its staff people, so all of our focus is on developing systems and programs. We’re about gospel transformation. It’s about figuring out the best model for partnership with the local church and colleges and universities. It’s about getting the best people, training them, and keeping them. We have focused all of our efforts and all of our strategy and all of our infrastructure around those three pillars.
Al: Yeah, that’s fantastic. Given how far you’ve come as a culture and as an organization, what one affirmation would you most want to share with your people if they were in front of you right now? Let’s just picture you’re in front of your 300 staff. You’re at one of your staff retreats. What would you want to say to them and affirm them just about the culture you have?

Vince: I know this is a bit biased, but I think the work they’re doing is the most important work they could do in our world today. It’s taking young people who are in a season of their life where they’re trying to figure out who they’re going to be and what they’re going to be about, and they’re influencing them for Christ and drawing them into the local church.

The encouragement I would bring to our staff people is quite simply the way they’re doing that is they are representing Christ both to the church, to the culture, and to colleges and universities. They have the unique opportunity to be bridge builders in a way that I think few people and organizations can be right now in our world.

They have an opportunity to really represent salt and light in a unique way, to really love college students and love the college and university, but also help them understand that things are not the way they were created to be. As Christians, we call that the fall. We’re living in a fallen world that already has a resurrected Christ, which is a beautiful, intense place to be. I would just continue to encourage them to keep going and understand there is a need for that gospel ministry to continue to grow on college campuses all over the world.

Al: I also believe you’re showing college students who are being discipled what community looks like as they see your staff work together and be in community together. That’s an imprint they can take with them for the rest of their life and could be very valuable for that to happen. Yeah, that’s great.

Vince, this has just been a great conversation. As we conclude our time, what would you most like to say to your fellow Christian leaders about why having a healthy, flourishing culture is so connected to the effectiveness of your organization?

Vince: I think we were created by God to have meaning and purpose in our lives. Though it can’t be the totality of our fulfillment and the totality of our purpose, I think everybody wants to get up and go to work knowing the work they do has purpose and meaning. I think when you have an unhealthy culture, even if your mission is a beautiful and necessary one and is meeting gospel needs, it doesn’t feel like your work has meaning.

I would really encourage other Christian leaders to be brutally honest. You know, we referenced the 360 I was a part of. I get some brutal honesty when I’m part of that. When we reflect every year when we do the Best Christian Workplaces Survey, get those results, and reflect on what those results have to say, we try to be brutally honest with ourselves because we really want our people to be passionate about what they’re doing.

I think if we have an unhealthy culture, the passion begins to dwindle. It’s very hard to show up for work no matter how compelling your mission is if your organizational culture is not a healthy culture. I would just encourage Christian leaders all over the country, be brutally honest about the places where
you’re unhealthy, because until you can define it, name it, and point to it, you’ll never hope your way into a healthy culture. You have to address it and change.

Al: Well, that’s a great word. Thanks for all you’ve shared with us today. I certainly have enjoyed what we’ve learned. Vince Burens, chief executive officer for the Coalition for Christian Outreach, thank you for sharing your wisdom, insights, and stories. Thank you for extending your ministry to the leaders who have been listening and benefiting from all you’ve shared with us today.

Vince: Thank you, Al. It’s been an honor to be with you. Thanks.

Al: Absolutely! To our listeners, thank you for investing this time in your workplace culture. This is Al Lopus reminding you that a healthy culture drives greater impact and growth for your organization. I’ll see you again soon on the Flourishing Culture Podcast.

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