



The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series
“How a Healthy Culture Can Impact Your Future”
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Chris Dolan and Brian Stanton

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. Few churches have made a long-term impact on New York City like Redeemer Presbyterian Church under the leadership of Tim Keller. As Redeemer has begun to prepare for Tim’s transition from senior pastor, they have embarked on a journey to improve the health of their organizational culture and to better position them for the future.

Today we have the pleasure of talking with Brian Stanton, who has been with Redeemer for 14 years and has served as their chief financial officer for the last 12, and Chris Dolan, the co-chair of the culture team who is also the director of information services for the church. Redeemer Presbyterian Church is in New York City, and its vision is to build a great city for all people through the movement of the gospel that brings personal conversion, community formation, social justice, and cultural renewal to New York City and, through it, the world.

Hi, Brian. Hi, Chris. Welcome to our podcast.

Chris Dolan: Thanks for having us, Al.

Al: We’re really looking forward to this conversation. I’m looking forward to what you have to share about how the concept of shoring up Redeemer’s culture and leadership capacity came to the forefront a couple of years ago. First, let’s talk a little bit about yourselves. Brian, how about you? Tell us a little bit about your role at Redeemer and how long you’ve been there.

Brian Stanton: Yeah, sure, Al. I came to Redeemer in 2002 after working 11 years at IBM. Then I worked one year at a tech startup. Redeemer was growing rapidly after 9/11, and I was really looking for a way to channel my business skills for a kingdom purpose. That's really what brought me to Redeemer. Putting good, solid business skills into use in the church world I think is just so important. It just makes ministry better. That's one of the things I've really enjoyed doing at Redeemer.

Al: Great! Yeah! Chris, I'm really interested in a little bit about your background and what your interest was in co-chairing this committee.

Chris: Yes, I've been at Redeemer for seven years (since January 2010). I first started at Redeemer in the Center for Faith and Work, which is our vocational ministry within the church. I've been overseeing IT (what we call Information Services) at Redeemer for almost four years now.

Al: Great!

Chris: When I moved to New York, I had worked at a church prior to this and didn't think I'd work for a church again. I love the local church, and I love the mission and what it does, but I have never felt the call to get ordained and didn't see a lot of opportunities for myself within the church. Fortunately, a church the size of Redeemer had a lot of opportunities. When I moved here, I got plugged in at the Center for Faith and Work doing event planning, and now I oversee IT.

Al: When this committee came up (the culture committee, I believe), what was your interest in being the chair of that or being part of the committee?

Chris: Yeah, so I've always been operationally minded. I love the mission of the church, and I want to see the church thrive and grow. I want to see it work as a well-oiled machine, but I think it's more than just having a great financial system or finance team. It's more than just having great HR practices or IT services. Really to have a great organization, you have to have a strong culture. That was my interest: to see the organization thrive by having a great culture.

Al: Yeah, great. A couple of years ago, as I understand it, Redeemer decided to assess its internal strengths and opportunities for improvement as an organization. In fact, you set aside some resources to build into your leadership. Tell us what you were trying to achieve and why and how that led perhaps to completing the Best Christian Workplace Survey.

Brian: Yeah, maybe I'll start first, and I'm sure Chris can jump in as well. A couple of years back (and really I would say more than just a couple of years back), Redeemer has been going through a process of change. In 2011, we really started to put in place the succession plan for Tim Keller. Basically, we would be not replacing Tim with a single person, but we would install lead pastors at each of our campuses or locations in 2011. Those lead pastors would then eventually become senior pastors when Tim moved on.

There was a lot of change happening in 2011 kind of leading up to that. Then in 2015 when the plan really started to come in place and we started our Rise campaign, that's when this all became more real. All of our central ministries such as Faith and Work (which Chris mentioned), our counseling center,

Diaconate, and our group in working with all the changes happening within our campuses... We said, "You know, we have to get a handle on how we can do this right and handle all this change."

As it turned out, at the end of 2014, we had a really, really good giving year. We said, "Let's set aside some of that surplus and really invest in our team." To make a long story short, that led to reaching out to BCWI and really working on what I would say is probably our first employee survey to kind of see how we were doing in handling all of this change.

Al: Yeah, great. Chris, anything else to add there?

Chris: Yeah, like Brian said, there was some money set aside that was a big catalyst for this. Another big thing was we had just changed offices. In New York City, it's a little more difficult than most parts of the country. We rent office space, and our lease had just expired. We moved into a new space, so as we were planning for what the new office layouts were going to be, we had a number of conversations about how the new space was going to impact our culture one way or the other.

We decided as a team that we wanted to be proactive about impacting that culture for the good. The culture team formed right at about the same time. The culture team working with this team that was overseeing this money decided to first do the Staff Engagement Survey with BCWI, which then led to a number of staff development opportunities we've been doing over the last year or 18 months.

Al: Yeah, you decided to conduct the Employee Engagement Survey we do, and it revealed some opportunities to improve (I think might be a way to describe it). How did your first assessment help in the process? Chris is the culture team coach here. Did you receive what you were hoping for when you got the survey results back?

Chris: We did! However, I will say the first year was a bit challenging. Our results were all over the place. We had just switched offices, so we had people complaining about everything from the location of the water cooler to more serious culture issues that had existed in the organization for years. It was a challenge because we had a lot of different things to focus on.

We met as a team, and we prioritized what we thought would be some of the low-hanging fruit we could work on for the first year. We bit off a number of those and worked on those. The second year, the good thing is it was much more focused around where our true issues were. It's really helped us in year two.

Al: Yeah, great. Brian, when you think about just embarking on that, what was your reaction?

Brian: Yeah, Al, I would echo what Chris said. We had a lot of areas to work on, and they were somewhat all over the board. Going into it knowing we had not done a survey really in our past, I was actually expecting it maybe to be even worse than it actually was.

But I really appreciated how your team (you and Giselle) kind of helped us through where to focus, how to interpret the results of the survey, where to make some (if you will) significant changes or some changes that could be quick wins. I think that built a lot of momentum where our whole staff and our

culture team saw we really could make changes and improve the culture in various ways incrementally. I think that helped us a lot.

AI: Yeah, thanks. Well, we find that behind every successful church is a healthy to a flourishing culture and a workplace culture. When you begin to think about, “Okay, so what was an action step?” what was a positive outcome you experienced early in your culture transformation after that original survey?

Brian: One of the quick wins I can remember was in the survey results, it pointed out we’d always had really good health benefits. We had a really good retirement program for our senior staff, but we had a hole in our benefits that we really didn’t have anything by way of employer contributions or matching for our non-director level staff.

This came out in the survey very, very clearly when we saw the variance in the results between the staff members. We put together a plan. Luckily, and perhaps providentially, that we did the survey in October. Our budgets were being finalized for the following year in October, and we were able to build \$100,000 into our budget to develop a one-for-one matching program for our non-director level staff.

We announced it very, very quickly after the survey. That was a really big win, I think, in having our staff understand, “Hey, these survey results mean something. The leadership of the church is actually looking at them and making changes based on them.” Then I think that helped us kind of springboard into a number of different initiatives that took a little bit more planning to basically pull off.

AI: Now I remember that conversation. Boy, then we came back the second year, and it was very clear you had done something just by the results. I mean, it was a really dramatic change. I was thrilled to see how quickly you’d taken action on that. Fantastic!

Chris, management development was a key goal right from the beginning. We helped you with some of the key steps as part of a broader strategy. Can you share with our listeners about your management development efforts over the past year? What are some of the things you’ve done since that original survey and then the second survey to really address some of these management development issues.

Chris: One of the things that was very apparent in the first year survey was there were a lot of inconsistencies in how our managers managed. As we looked at that and had a number of conversations, we realized there was really never any formal management training for a lot of our managers at Redeemer. People had advanced through the ranks and been promoted to manager, but they never were really formally trained. One of the things we did was we utilized some of the monies that were set aside to really do some great training throughout the year.

We brought Giselle in from your team to do two days of formal management training, a day of kind of 101 beginner training, as well as a second day of management excellence for those who maybe hadn’t had formal training or had been *great* managers. We want them to be *excellent* managers. That was one of the opportunities. We also did some particular workshops around other areas we recognized through the survey results we were weak in like conflict resolution, feedback, etcetera.

Al: Yeah, Chris, you know, when you look at that 101 and management excellence training, what were some of the elements you really felt touched the need of your managers and leaders?

Chris: One of the big things that stood out was feedback from those trainings. In fact, it's actually led us to a process we're going through right now where we are revamping the employee evaluation process. We realize feedback is not something that happens on an annual basis once a year. It's something that should be happening on a regular basis.

Feedback should be something that happens immediately when the problem is recognized. That's something we're trying to build into our culture right now with tools for managers that allow them to give feedback continuously throughout the year.

Al: Brian, any thoughts on your side about what specific things about that training (either the 101 or the management excellence) seemed to hit a chord with your team?

Brian: I think the team really benefited from the elements of the training that talked about accountability and the need for accountability. We did this training not just for managers but also employees as well. It was surprising to me when we went through the various trainings that a lot of the people who are in the front lines doing ministry at the entry level felt like they couldn't question things their managers were asking them to do or felt like they couldn't confront if they had a different idea.

Coming from New York City, it was somewhat surprising to me as someone who is a manager that there would be people working at the church who would feel like having a different opinion in the meeting was something not allowed or forbidden or that type of thing. I think all of us as managers kind of had a little bit of an eye-opening experience and said, "We have to do a better job of drawing out some of the healthy conflict within our teams and really giving our teams the ability to be heard and to be listened to when we make ministry decisions that are going on."

A lot of it is just talking to people, asking the right questions, having those right conversations. I just think we weren't doing enough of that, and the training has really helped us make a shift in that direction.

Al: Yeah, that's great. You know, when we talk about these kinds of things helping to grow the healthier culture, it certainly has an impact on productivity, transparency, communication, and even building trust in an organization. When you stand back and look at all that's happened at Redeemer and the work you're doing, what's some of the best improvement in your culture? You know, what difference are you seeing? What's really happening in terms of making Redeemer Presbyterian Church a healthier culture?

Brian: Well, maybe I'll start, Al. I'll have to say that for me when I look back and think of it, I think just the fact that we're focusing on the culture at Redeemer on a continuous basis and it's not a one-time fix that we feel like we're going to do some initiatives and hold some management training. "Okay, we're done. We can move on."

I think the staff has realized this is, if you will, an ongoing, continuous way of improving how we all can work together to do ministry in the city. Top leadership is behind it, and the culture team is not just made up of the top leaders within the organization but made up of representatives from all throughout the organization. It's led to so many improvements.

We used to not really have any onboarding process at all, and now we have a really great one. The manager training we talked about looking at. If you will, the dreaded once-a-year performance review process and how we make that something that's much lighter weight and continuous. Really, it's going to make for the ability for Redeemer to do better ministry in the city.

AI: Yeah, absolutely. Chris, anything to add on that?

Chris: Yeah, AI. One thing I would add is a change just in the perception of a general staff member and their ability to implement change. I think through the staff survey results, they have felt heard. They have seen the senior leadership is willing to respond, to take the results seriously, to take actions. I think people are willing to voice their concerns, their thoughts, their opinions, their ideas more vocally and kind of chip in themselves to do what they can to make it a better culture.

AI: Yeah, great. You've really taken action steps: management training at a couple of different levels, conflict resolution training, onboarding. You've impacted your retirement plan. You've refocused your performance review. Chris, as you said, the general staff member has a perception, "Hey, leaders are listening." It's really impacting the sense that they're involved in what's going on to make them even more engaged in the church. That's fantastic.

When we look at some of the strengths that came out in the survey, in our FLOURISH model particularly, "healthy communication and outstanding talent" are kind of at the top of the list. Clearly you have great people (that outstanding talent). You attract smart, young people into the ministry, and you're doing a great job with communicating in the sense of people being involved. If your entire staff were gathered together right now, given how far you've come as a culture as an organization, what one affirmation would you most want to share with your people?

Brian: The one thing I'd share with our entire staff is that really ministry can't be done but for staff. It's really interesting that God works through all of us, whether we're attendees of a church or we're in ministry at the church. Really if you think about what a church does, it just can't be done without the people.

Investing in the people is just something Chris and I are playing a small part of here at Redeemer, but it's really the people who deliver ministry. I think for most staff people, you could think, "Oh, Redeemer is such a big church, and it's all about the preaching," or, "It's all about the senior leaders." No, it's all about the *people*. Everyone working within Redeemer is really playing a vital role in the ministry God is doing through Redeemer.

AI: Yep, it's through the people. Absolutely! Chris, a thought?

Chris: One thing I've been sharing with the culture team and I've mentioned with the staff is it takes everyone to change a culture. Certainly leaders have impact and maybe some of them have the ability to have greater impact, but everybody can impact the culture.

I think that's what we've seen here at Redeemer. Through the staff survey results and through the culture team, like Brian said, these are not the most senior people within the organization. They have had a huge impact. The culture is made up of everybody in it, and everybody plays a role. It's up to each of us to do what we can to make it the best culture it can be.

Al: That's great. Yeah, it takes everyone, and it's everybody's role to really be engaged in the culture. That's for sure! Well, I want to thank you guys for being with us today. It certainly has been a great experience. We've learned a lot.

When we look at challenges that churches like Redeemer have, as you look at transitions and what it takes to remain healthy through a transition like you have faced since even 2011, when you see that challenge and then when you come to that with a strategy to build the health of your culture so the church will be healthy going through that transition...

When you do things (as I've already mentioned and that you've highlighted) doing management training and making your managers even more effective, onboarding, performance reviews, retirement plan improvements, and just making sure people know that what they do really does make a difference, it creates great results. Thanks, Brian and Chris, for sharing your wisdom, insights, and stories. Thank you for extending your ministry to the leaders who have been listening and benefiting from all we've had to share today.

Brian: Thanks, Al.

Chris: Thank you, Al.

Al: To our listeners, thank you for investing your time in our workplace culture today. This is Al Lopus reminding you that a healthy culture drives greater impact and growth for your organization. I'd like to see you again soon on the Flourishing Culture Podcast.

Male: For a free transcript of today's podcast, visit 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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