



The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series

“How to Bust Silos and Build Your Culture with Christlike Humility“

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Dr. Sam Barfell

Male: Welcome to the Flourishing Culture Podcast, where you’ll learn how to build a flourishing workplace culture that drives the ministry impact of your organization, your church, or your company, brought to you by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. Now here’s your host, BCWI president, Al Lopus.

Al Lopus: Hello, and thanks for joining us today. It always gives us great joy when we see a Christian organization make a significant improvement in their culture and reach the flourishing level. Today you’re going to hear an inspiring story that will give you some powerful, practical approaches you can use to improve the health of your culture.

We have the pleasure of visiting with Dr. Sam Barfell, the superintendent of Southside Christian School in Simpsonville, South Carolina. He is the superintendent of a program from Pre-K through twelfth grade. Their purpose is to partner with Christian parents to provide an excellent education consistent with biblical truth. Hi, Sam, and welcome to our podcast.

Sam Barfell: Thanks, Al. It’s great to be with you today.

Al: We’re looking forward to what you have to share to help our listeners see the benefits of having a healthy or even, in your case, a flourishing culture. First, let’s get to know you. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Sam: Thanks, Al. I came to Southside Christian School just a couple of years ago in the summer of 2015. So I’m just beginning my third year here at Southside Christian, but it is my thirty-fifth year as a Christian school educator. That clearly is my calling and my wiring. It’s been something I believe God has appointed me to and have had a joy to serve as a Christian school educator all these years.

Before coming to Southside Christian, I served eight years with ACSI, which is the Association of Christian Schools International. There were several things about Southside Christian that drew me here. One was the reputation the school had. Second was the school understood its vital role as a Christian school in spiritual formation, the commitment to academic excellence, and a strong administrative team.

One of the most important things for me was a strong and disciplined board who understood their role and leads our school through policy governance. It's just been a great relationship. I'm really convinced, Al, I have the best job on the planet. Just the staff, the faculty, the kids, the families, the board I get to work for, and the impact we're trying to have for Christ and his kingdom... I'm excited to be at Southside Christian School.

Al: How many students do you have in your program, Sam?

Sam: Well, I happen to know that. School just started a couple of weeks ago, and we have 1,064 kids in our school (early education through twelfth grade).

Al: As you settled into your role, Sam, what key need, challenge, or opportunity were you facing in culture, and what did you set out to achieve?

Sam: Yeah, that's a great question. When I came here and through the process of interviewing, leaving ACSI, and interviewing at several schools across the country, I saw Southside Christian as quite a strong school with a strong and vibrant culture both in the student body and among the 200 employees. But being new coming in to lead this great school, I did want to formally assess that culture. I've learned over the years, Al, to love data. Data is just a great friend that always is able to inform and help decisions.

Being familiar with the Best Christian Workplace Institute through my years at ACSI, I knew who to go to to help me get the data I wanted in formally assessing the culture here at Southside Christian. Our first year score... We took that BCWI survey in March of my first year (so toward the end of the year). That first score was 4.05. The good news is we made it across that barrier of that 4, but we just barely made it. I recognized immediately that even though we are a strong culture, there is clearly room we can do and should do much better.

Al: Sam, what did the engagement survey actually reveal about the specific areas in your culture you needed or wanted to improve?

Sam: Yeah, one thing that came to the surface was one particular facet of our program and the people who spoke to that and serve in that specific program. It just became very clear that there was a

challenge there. They spoke honestly in that survey and just gave great information so I could get a handle on what the nature of that problem was and the nature of that challenge.

Another issue is we're an early education through twelfth grade school, so we have three schools within our system. We're all on one campus but three schools (early education school, lower school, and upper school). One of the problems was we were operating in silos, and we needed to be one unified school system. That was another challenge we saw as well.

Al: What you're saying is not only was the survey able to help you get a gauge for the overall school, but also actually you were able to kind of x-ray into specific areas?

Sam: No question! I mean, the amount of data we received and the benchmark data from other Christian organizations and other Christian schools, there was just a wealth of data we were able to mine and clearly gave us some strong direction. Then through the process of the consultation with your staff, Al, with Giselle, she just did an amazing job of walking us through that data, helping us interpret it, and then helping us prioritize it.

Al: Yeah, that's great. You know, behind successful organizations like yours, we find healthy to flourishing cultures. Behind every healthy culture, it's an intentional, well-thought-out strategy that engages its people. It doesn't happen by accident. You really took the feedback from your employees very seriously, and I know that through further discussions. You developed a strategy. Give us an example of an action step you took to help to improve the culture even from this 4.05, this healthy position.

Sam: Yes! So the first thing we did was just to report back to the employees. The survey was a new thing for us, so there were some people who were a little unsure about taking a survey, even though we told them it was anonymous, and it's a third-party organization of people we've contracted with, the Best Christian Workplace Institute. We tried to talk through and explain to them why we were doing this survey and what we were going to do with the data.

Then once the report came back to us... I have the privilege of meeting with all of our employees once a month. Obviously they meet in departmental meetings regularly, but once a month, I get all of them. One of the first things I did was give them a summary or an executive overview of that report and identified what our overall score was and what our top 10 things were they said about working here and then our bottom 10.

Then I just made a public commitment to our faculty and our staff that we as leaders (our administrative council here) would act on what they told us. We would take it seriously, and we would begin the process of trying to understand what all the data said and then act appropriately. Our

administrative team then (with the help of Giselle, our consultant with BCWI) focused on four specific areas.

In each department head... That would be our three principals, and then we have a director of HR, director of operations, director of advancement, and director of athletics. Each department head then began absorbing that data and then developing departmental goals for their staff for their area. We just used the BCWI tool provided for us and began to itemize action planning. That planning took place within the departments, but then we came back together as an administrative team and just kept working on that till we developed those areas, those priorities, and those goals together as a team.

Al: You already started off in a good position. You did all of this work, and then you surveyed again. *Boom!* The results speak for themselves: a 21-point increase, which is really an outstanding increase the year after. That took you to a flourishing level. I'll bet then that you have another example or an action step as part of your strategy that really engaged your employees and improved the health of your culture over that short period of time.

Sam: Yes. I sure do. You know, our administrative team together developed what we called our four initiatives from the BCWI survey. Those were just the top things we wanted to focus on. It's possible to focus on so many things, you don't do *any* of those well. So we determined we wanted to take the top three or four (and we identified four) we began to work on.

I spoke about it publicly to all of the employees each time I had that opportunity to speak to them, but part of each department head's normal meetings now was talking about, "Here are the goals we're developing." They allowed the employees to speak into those goals and then brought it up the next week. "Here's the progress we've made, and here are some changes we've made." We just began to talk about it.

Then, again, once I had the opportunity each month to report back the progress of all those goals and next steps, I did that in the context of our all-employee meeting. The outcome of that was we just talked about it a lot. We just were very transparent about it. "We are trying to improve. We want to improve. We're going to take this survey again next year to see how well we're doing."

Like you said, the results speak for themselves. I was just really encouraged to see we (I call it) "moved the needle" on that survey, a 21-point increase. You've shared with me and Giselle has shared with me, that's pretty significant. I'm just really grateful and thrilled our employees responded that way.

Al: Well, we're thrilled to see a .10 increase. This was double what we'd oftentimes see as good progress. That really is fantastic! You know, all the action planning took time, Sam, and time away from everyday work and running a school. Education is an intense business. Teachers are in the

classroom. Students need to be supervised. What would you say to people on the fence about spending so much concentrated time and action planning on a departmental level much like you've described?

Sam: Well, I guess what I would say is, "Why *wouldn't* you?" Then let me unpack that a little bit. I have just become a fan of reading about leadership and learning from other leaders. One of the authors I've become fond over the years is a guy named Patrick Lencioni. I'm sure you've heard of Patrick Lencioni.

In his book, *The Advantage*, he says this: "The single greatest advantage any company can achieve is organizational health. Yet it is ignored by most leaders even though it is simple, free, and available to anyone who wants it." I would just challenge anyone listening to this that (with the words of Patrick Lencioni) organizational health is attainable. It's free. It doesn't cost anything. It's simple, and it's available. Why *wouldn't* you do it? We just kind of thought it through from that perspective as well.

Another guy I've become very fond of is Dr. Henry Cloud. As a matter of fact, at my years at ACSI, I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Cloud and spend 36 hours with him. I was responsible to put together an international leadership event through ACSI. The last one I was able to do before coming here to Southside Christian, Dr. Henry Cloud was our featured speaker.

He basically taught from his book called *Boundaries for Leaders*. That 36-hour time with Dr. Cloud both listening to his teaching but then getting him back and forth to the airport, eating meals with him, was just such an insightful time. I just really relished that. One of the things he said in his book is, "In the end, as a leader, you are always going to get a combination of two things: what you create and what you allow."

He talks about a person who he mentored who came to that realization that the culture of his organization or his ministry, he is responsible for. This gentleman used the term, "I just realized I'm ridiculously in charge!" Dr. Cloud tells that story, and I just remember those words: "I'm ridiculously in charge!"

What that means is the culture here at Southside Christian School is going to be either what I create (or what I *cause* to create) or what I allow. The BCWI Employee Engagement Survey, again, gave me the data to make the decisions and to set that as a priority to achieve, maintain, and keep working at organizational health.

I would also say, Al, it's not one of those things you can just take a survey one time and say, "Okay, we did that." It's a sustained effort and a sustained priority over time. That's what communicates to the employees, "We're taking this seriously, and we want our organizational health to be very strong."

Al: You know, that's interesting you say that. We've just done a podcast (we've listened to it) from the president of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, John Stumbo. He describes every leader as a

cultural architect. That's what you're saying Dr. Cloud was suggesting. You're ridiculously in charge, but you're the cultural architect whether you intentionally focus on it or not. That's great insight.

Sam: I just wrote that down, Al. Cultural architect. I love that idea!

Al: Yeah, I think that is a great thing we could really promote and think about as leaders in the Christian context. You know, Sam, a big question is, how is it that you really helped grow the health of your culture, and how is it impacting Southside Christian School's mission effectiveness? For example, you know, what's one of the best outcomes your workplace culture has had on the school itself and the quality of the education you're providing?

Sam: Yeah, that's a great question, Al, and I'm going to refer back to the latest survey we just did last spring. In the executive summary there, there's a section that identifies any area or any question in the survey that we increase .50 or above. I was really encouraged to see that the five areas we increased, you know, half a point or more are these: "Leaders in an organization explain the reasons behind their major decisions." We really worked at that so no one thought we were making a decision in a closet, in a vacuum. We talked about those decisions and the rationale behind those decisions.

The next one was, "My organization acts on the suggestions of our staff employees," and I said, "Woohoo!" They actually felt that and experienced it. That went up .51. Then, "A high level of trust between leaders and the employees in my organization" again went up .51. Here's a group of people, choice servants of God, who were saying, "Hey, we trust our leadership and our leadership team."

Then, "In my organization, there is generally good teamwork across the departments." That went up five points as well. Those things are really encouraging, as well as the things the survey identified as our top 10 areas. Several of those were linked to the leadership team here, the good camaraderie we've developed, and the trust we've developed by simply asking our employees, "How can we make this a better place?"

Al: I trust you're enjoying our podcast. We'll be right back after this brief word about a valuable tool that can pinpoint the true, measurable health of your culture.

Male: What if you could get an upper hand on unwanted turnover, relationship conflicts, struggling morale, and unproductive staff, and at the same time increase the effectiveness and impact of your organization? You can with the Best Christian Workplace's Employee Engagement Survey. This popular, proven resource pinpoints the true health of your workplace culture and ways to improve it.

You'll get a detailed breakout summary of the eight essential ways your culture and your organization can flourish, all from a principled, practical, faith-based approach that works. Join the more than 800 satisfied organizations, churches, and Christian-owned businesses who have said yes. Sign up online

today at bcwinstitute.org. The Best Christian Workplace's Employee Engagement Survey. It's your first important step on the road to a flourishing culture.

Al: All right. Now let's hear more from today's guest. You know, Sam, you mentioned four areas you really worked on after that first survey that helped really launch this improvement. I'll bet they had a lot to do with acting on suggestions, communicating, building trust, and building teamwork. You already had mentioned you felt like there were three different schools, not one school system. What were those four initiatives? Do you remember off the top of your head?

Sam: I sure do! Those four initiatives we worked through last year... The first one was unity among the three schools/transition of leadership. The transition of leadership came in that two of our three principals retired, so two of the three principals were new, as well as a new superintendent who had just been here one year. So clearly the transition of leadership can be a disconcerting thing for employees when it's that large. We just talked about that. That was the first one (unity among the schools and transition of leadership).

The second one was what we called a sustainable strategy: meeting the needs of the students and the families we serve. The third one was life-giving work, compensation, using my skills and my spiritual gifts. The whole idea of compensation, being called, using my skills, and using my spiritual gifts in the appropriate places. It's kind of the idea of, "We're all on the right bus committed to Christian schooling, but are we each in the right seat?"

Then the fourth one was the healthy communications, seeking and implementing suggestions from staff and encouragement to be innovative. Those were the four areas we talked about that each department set specific goals, and we worked through and just included all of the employees in that process.

Al: Just listening to you talk about that, not only did the survey help identify those strategies but also then once you implemented them, those were the improvements you saw. Funny how that works, right?

Sam: It is funny how that works. Another just personal, anecdotal story is school just started a few weeks ago here. We go through something in the school called "in-service." You know, the teachers all come back, and we have meetings. We get our rooms prepped, you know, a week or so before the students arrive.

Then right after school started, I bumped into one our teachers. She just stopped and said, "Thank you so much for listening to the concerns and perspective of all the employees!" She mentioned something very specific. She said, "You know, we've always needed separate adult facilities (bathrooms) for the faculty and staff. Finally you guys did that!"

It was interesting. I had to chuckle. I wasn't even involved in that decision. I didn't even know it had happened, but yet her department head (her upper school principal) made that choice based on input from the faculty. Here was an employee giving me credit for it and just loving she connected those dots that, "We now have a separate adult facility we don't have to share with students. Boy, you've listened. Thank you!" I chuckled because I wasn't even a part of that decision, didn't even know it had happened!

Al: Wow! Isn't that great? Yeah! That's an example of how you just created the culture. Back to the cultural architect part, you created the culture. You wanted to have healthy communication. You communicated that. You wanted to listen to faculty and staff recommendations and *boom!* This stuff happens. Wow! That's a great example, Sam.

You know, when you look back at your 10 strengths as a culture you've mentioned, certainly in our terminology, inspirational leadership is a major theme. Your staff confirmed there are high levels of trust, and leadership is humble and transparent when it comes to being effective leaders and managers. Give us a picture of a person or a story of how growing humility and transparency in your leaders has resulted in greater trust. Perhaps a story of a person whose humility and transparency has inspired you!

Sam: Well, I don't know if I have a specific story like *that* that I can share, but I have one that is certainly related to that of being transparent and humble. I think that does reflect our leadership team here. One of the things we decided to do as a team last year is work through a leadership book each year. The book we chose as a team (our leadership team at Southside Christian) was to read and study the book called *Leading with a Limp*, by Dr. Dan Allender.

Each month when we get together, we carve out a time where we review the reading of that book and how it applies to our leadership personally, who we are in Christ as leaders, and how it actually flushes itself out in our leadership. We literally talked about, prayed about, and grew together in being transparent with our faults and leading from a point of humility.

I think that's just an expression of our team's heart. Sometimes leaders can come across in a way that's less than humble, and it might be part of a personality thing where many leaders are a high D type personality. "We make decisions quickly and move on." It might not necessarily be a lack of humility as much as just moving and getting things done that some people receive it as something less than humble. But the point I'm making is we as a team talked about that, prayed about that, sought to be humble, and to lead by serving the people God has called us to lead.

Maybe another example of that is one of our principals (our new upper school principal who is over our middle and high school) adopted kind of a slogan for his team (the upper school team). He talked

about it. He put it on his wall and even did some artwork they all participated in together (I'm talking about the employees). The slogan was, "Broken together, stronger together."

I just think that kind of summarizes the heart of our leadership here. It's that, yeah, we are in a position that we have to make decisions, and we're called upon to lead. But we're in this thing together. We're broken together, but we're also better together. That is just I think a beautiful picture of the body of Christ when it's functioning as it should. I just thought that was a great strategy for one of our leaders here with his team.

AI: Yeah, and that even gets at breaking down silos because it talks about being together. We're all one. We're all similar. We're broken together. We're strong together. That's great. On another note, you mentioned as you were working with Giselle Jenkins (one of our colleagues), after the initial staff engagement survey, you then decided to go ahead and do a 360 with your key leaders. Tell us about that a little bit, Sam.

Sam: Yeah, sure did. Again, being familiar with that tool, that tool (the 360 evaluation instrument) was the thing that caused me to reach out to BCWI in the first place. I needed that for my administrative team, and I wanted my administrative team to be able to participate in that and for my own evaluation the board gives to me.

I felt like, "If I'm going to do it with them, I want the board to do it for me," which is exactly what happened. When we took that 360 leadership evaluation, each of our administrative team did that, so each of the people who served underneath them in the organizational structure was able to speak into that. It was so helpful! It was insightful for me trying to lead as a new leader here, trying to lead a very strong administrative team. It identified areas individually that individual needed to work on (and that was true for all of us, including myself when I went through that with my board).

One other thing it did is it really gave me some data that I sensed was there but was just having a hard time getting a handle on it until I got the results of the 360 and was able to talk and dialogue very honestly and openly with one of our leaders about this area. Transformative change happened as a result of that. It was a highly valuable tool.

AI: Yeah, as you said earlier, that's another use of data and how that helped you get a real head start on the work you were doing. As we conclude our time, Sam, when you think about what's meant most to you in improving your culture, what one thing would you say to your fellow Christian leaders about the cultural journey you've been on at Southside Christian School?

Sam: Again, I came into a strong school and a strong organization with good organizational health to start with. My first year here, one of the things I did... I get to lead faculty devotions every Friday

morning. I get a 10-minute window to try and unpack a salient thought or a relevant thought from Scripture in just a 10-minute devotional before everybody gets going on their busy day.

What we decided to do was to do a study verse-by-verse of the book of 1 Thessalonians. As a matter of fact, I took a trip to Greece where Thessaloniki is located. I took a group of 15 students, and we followed the footsteps of Paul. One of the things Paul said in 1 Thessalonians to those believers there (that new baby church in Thessaloniki)... He wrote them that letter, that epistle (1 Thessalonians), and he was commending them for receiving the gospel, sharing the gospel, and heralding it out into their city, their state, and their country. Then he said, "But we need to excel still further."

Really what just really lights my jets or gets me excited, gives me energy, and fills me is the idea that, yeah, God has given us some level of strength, some level of effectiveness in the pursuit of our mission here at Southside Christian, but we can't be static. If we're not seeking to improve, we're declining.

I have challenged our faculty, our staff, and our student body that we're a good school, but we have to excel still further. We need to become a great school, and we're not doing this for ourselves. We're doing it for the kingdom. We're doing it for the Lord. It's less of us and more of him. But those words from Paul to the believers in Thessaloniki ("Excel still further") kind of rang in my mind. I got to be in the place, the very city, Paul interacted with those people a couple thousand years ago. We've kind of adopted that.

When I see that happening and people grabbing ahold of that ("Yes, we want to be better. We *can* be better. Let's do better"), that just excites me. That, I think, would be an example of something that just really lights my passions just a bit.

AI: Absolutely! Yes! Let's excel for the sake of the kingdom. Well, it's really been a pleasure. I want to thank you for being with us. I've enjoyed what we've talked about. What a great story. You came into a new role. You did some analysis. You found that, in fact, you wanted to have one program amongst your three schools, but really you had three unique schools, not one school system.

You measured the health of your culture. You followed that up with 360s with your leadership team. You developed four key initiatives to improve the unity, to create a sustainable strategy, to provide life-giving work for those who are serving with you and healthy compensation and communication. Yet after a year, you found you had great improvements in all of those areas. In fact, you moved to a flourishing culture. That's a great story.

Sam Barfell, superintendent of Southside Christian School in Simpsonville, South Carolina, thank you for sharing your wisdom, your insights, and these great stories. Thank you for extending your ministry to the leaders who have been listening and benefiting from all you've shared with us today.

Sam: Thanks, Al. It's been an honor to chat with you today. Just I pray blessings on your ministry at Best Christian Workplace Institute. It's a significant ministry that helps Christian ministries across the country be better and have healthy cultures.

Al: Yeah. Thank you, Sam. To our listeners, thank you for investing this time in your workplace culture journey today. 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.

Male: For a free transcript of today's podcast, visit blog.bcwinstitute.org. Join us next week for another one-to-one interview with a respected Christian leader. The Flourishing Culture Podcast with Al Lopus is a presentation of BCWI, the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, helping Christian organizations set the standard as the best, most effective places to work in the world.