



The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series
“How the Board and CEO Relationship Impacts Culture “
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Peter Greer, Hope International

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. Today we have the pleasure of talking with Peter Greer, president and CEO of HOPE International, a global nonprofit focused on Christ-centered job creation, savings mobilization, and microenterprise development. Peter is the coauthor (along with David Weekley) of the new book, *The Board and the CEO: Seven practices to protect your organization's most important relationship*. Hi, Peter, and welcome to our podcast today.

Peter Greer: I appreciate you having me on!

Al: Great! I'm glad you can be here. You know, I loved your book *Mission Drift* along with your coauthor, Chris Horst. In fact, I had a Christian nonprofit board I chair actually read it. *Mission Drift* focuses on keeping an organization on point with its Christian mission, yet in this book, *The Board and the CEO*, you narrow the focus to the board/CEO relationship. In fact, you say it's the most important of any relationship in an organization. What was the reason you felt this was so important that, in fact, you wanted to write a book about it?

Peter: Yeah, well, I appreciate you connecting it to *Mission Drift* because that's really where it started. It was in our research with *Mission Drift* we were trying to identify, “What are the causes of organizational drift? Why do they start with one mission and yet over time seem to be doing something completely different? Then, most importantly, what can we do to prevent that type of mission drift?”

In doing the research, one of the things we identified, we focused just a little bit on the role of the board and how the role of the board really is to be the protector of the mission. We started doing a little bit more research on that specific topic. Originally this was designed to be more of a white paper, kind of a “tips and practices,” if you will, of how to help a board make sure it does its job in protecting the mission of the organization.

In the research we did, we thought we might share that with some friends as well. So really it was flowing from the research in *Mission Drift* and then trying to get more concrete, more practical so individuals could really have a thriving relationship between the board and the CEO.

Al: Yeah, great! It really came out of that research. That’s fascinating. Well, in the second chapter, “Clarity, Not Confusion,” you talk about creating a board policy manual that articulates the distinct role of the board and then also the CEO. How did the board policy manual at HOPE International actually come about? I think our CEOs, our senior leaders, are interested in how these things come about. Would you describe some of the ways it identifies the board’s role first as the CEO?

Peter: Yeah, whether it’s a podcast or whether it’s a conference, oftentimes it’s easy to share about all the successes we have, and yet I think it’s actually some of the greatest moments of challenge that tend to be the most important learning opportunities. I can tell you almost each of these chapters is not born out of something we’ve done great, but it’s actually been born out of a situation that was a little bit of a conflict, a little bit of uncertainty, or a little bit of ambiguity.

For me, this idea about roles and responsibilities, the idea of having clarity, came out of a time where I was at a board meeting, and the board meeting was good. It was focused on so many of the right pieces, but I knew at the end of that board meeting, I was frustrated because I wasn’t sure, “What am I supposed to be doing? Do I have the authority to say, ‘We should do this’? What does the board...?”

It was a bit of this awkward dance where you feel like you’re always stepping on someone’s toes. “Is this my responsibility? Is this the board’s responsibility?” If there’s not clarity in the relationship, if there’s not clarity about the roles and responsibilities, the reality is then you are introducing unnecessary conflict into a relationship that’s a really important and significant relationship.

I think part of also the reason why we wrote this book is when we went out and had conversations with other nonprofit leaders, the vast majority identified some aspect of their relationship with the board as their most significant concern or their most pressing issue they felt like they needed to deal with. A lot of that conflict, a lot of that angst, a lot of that confusion, can be fixed by simply having clarity at the beginning point about what the roles and responsibilities are.

Al: Yeah, I’ve been on boards, and some people come in, especially hard-charging CEO-types who we attract to boards. They want kind of like an operational review, kind of tell you the way things should

be. So that causes a lot of, “Okay, who is really in charge here?” Now has your coauthor been your board chair? What’s his role in this process?

Peter: I wrote this with David Weekley. He is a philanthropist. He is active on many boards. He is founder and CEO of David Weekley Homes. I believe it’s still the largest privately held home-building company in the United States. He has been a friend, a coach. He has not been on HOPE International’s board, but he has been on so many other boards.

We wrote a little book together called *The Giver and the Gift* and this idea about fundraising and trying to bring both perspectives, both the philanthropist as well as someone who is raising funds for a ministry. We continued this conversation in the board conversation. He brings a lot of experience as board chair, and I was bringing the experience as the CEO interacting with a board.

That was our partnership. The intentionality of saying, “We want to make sure this book speaks to both board members as well as CEOs,” and both perspectives are represented fairly and accurately in this small book we created together.

Al: That’s great! You know, you have mentioned how this ambiguity sometimes creates tension. I regularly talk with CEOs who seem to walk on eggshells when it comes to their relationship with the board and especially the chair. I also sense some are hesitant to ask for direct feedback about their performance. What advice do you have for CEOs and boards to overcome this lack of clarity? Or, as you describe it, oftentimes there’s a mystery that goes on between the board or the board chair and the CEO. What would you suggest?

Peter: Yeah, I think it starts... Before you get to the practical skills, oftentimes there are tools. Oftentimes you have to start with a concept. What’s the concept? What’s the theory? When it comes to nonprofits, this is not about an individual, right? This is not about a board member. This is not about a CEO. You are joined together in the pursuit of a mission you believe is really important.

Starting from this beginning point, this is about the mission. This is not about my feelings in some way. I think having this belief that the mission is what matters most, that means we want to actively solicit feedback that can help us identify our blind spots and help us do our jobs more effectively. That’s true for both a board member as well as a CEO.

Starting from this perspective of saying, “The mission matters most; therefore, we want to be honest with each other. We want to identify areas where we can improve...” That doesn’t always mean easy conversation. That doesn’t mean we do pain avoidance or conflict avoidance, but it means, because the mission matters so much, we want to do everything well to the very best of our ability.

AI, this is where we are users of Best Christian Workplace. We are users of the 360-review process. We have just been so positively impacted by the really important, the significant work you are doing. There are tools. There's a 360-degree tool. There are other ways you can make sure you are having a system where everyone is invited to provide feedback so the mission can continue.

AI: Peter, so when you experience... You get that feedback from the board. I mean, you know how the board feels about your performance, the performance of the organization. That gives you clarity, doesn't it?

Peter: It does! Again, that doesn't mean it's always the easiest conversations, but I don't want to be surprised. I think that's actually one of the good rules of engagement. Within the board meeting itself, I don't want to be surprised, and I don't want the board members to be surprised by anything.

There's an element of truth-telling, there's a bit of perhaps courage that sometimes is necessary, and there's enough time that is invested into the relationship outside of this specific board meeting that there's enough of a relationship, there's enough of an opportunity to listen well that, again, no surprises or few big surprises when you're actually in the board meeting discussing some really significant and important issues.

AI: Yeah, and as you say, when everybody is really on point about the mission, that really makes a difference.

Peter: It does! It's a starting point where mission is what matters most.

AI: 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 Workplaces 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 Workplaces Employee Engagement Survey. It's your first important step on the road to a flourishing culture.

AI: All right. Now let's hear more from today's guest. You had mentioned a little bit about this, but I know you really care about the health of your staff culture, not only in the US but also around the

world. How does your board hold you accountable for the health of your staff culture? Is that part of your board policy manual?

Peter: One of the aspects of, again, learning from times where not everything was going well, I was deeply impacted by the fact that we as an organization have as our mission to invest in the dreams of families as we proclaim and live the model. Our work is all designed to help families flourish. Yes, it's about microenterprise development and job creation, but it's to help people flourish.

Yet for so many organizations... In HOPE International, certainly there have been times in the past where we have been so focused on our mission of helping individuals flourish that we missed the opportunity to even ask the question, "Are our staff flourishing?" I think that is a key gap, and long-term, it will cause an organization to get off track. It will cause an organization not to have the impact or outreach you want it to have. Yet it is an essential ingredient that too often goes missing about, "What's the impact on the staff?"

Yes, we have actually a subcommittee of the board that is called Culture and Spiritual Vitality. I love that. What really is happening? It is that committee that looks at our Best Christian Workplace results. It is that committee where we wrestle through some of the aspects of culture, policy, "How are we caring for this global team we have?" and identifying areas where we fall short and areas we want to improve.

Al: Wow! So you have a committee called the Culture and Spiritual Vitality Committee on your board. How big is that? Would that be three or four members of your board?

Peter: That's exactly right.

Al: Yeah. They meet independent of board meetings a couple of times a year, probably?

Peter: That's right. Yeah, so we have four full-board meetings a year, and then each committee that meets meets in between those. So four additional committee meetings in between the four all-board committees.

Al: Wow! Well, there is something for our listeners to chew on, having a separate committee for cultural and spiritual vitality, which again gets at the mission drift concept you had before. Yeah! Thanks for sharing that, Peter. That's fantastic.

You know, I once served on the board of a healthcare organization at a large hospital here in Seattle. I found this to be really helpful for us to focus on the mission. At the beginning of each board meeting, we actually had a patient come in and communicate their experience they had as a patient in our hospital. The board also instructed the staff who were bringing that patient in, "We don't just want to hear all good stories. We understand patients have hard times in their healthcare."

Well, you recommend a similar approach where you get the board close to the work that's being done. Tell us a story that inspired your board and a little bit about how you began this process.

Peter: Al, if we had had this conversation before the book went out, we would've been featuring your example right there. I think that's terrific! I think that really is the goal. When boards gather, oftentimes we dive right into the business. We dive into the financials. We dive into the committee reports. I think that's the principle: How can you make sure the mission stays at the forefront?

Oftentimes that takes a little bit more creativity about how to bring the mission to you, especially for an organization like HOPE International, local organizations. A couple of just brief examples. One is the power of Skype. We are having a Skype conversation. That makes the world a lot smaller. So inviting one of our international team members or someone who is serving with us around the world to actually participate.

We've launched a virtual reality tool. That was important as part of the board meeting for all of our board members to travel virtually. That was released. Looking at the simple stories every year, we recognize clients who are really embodying generosity. Those are a lot of really simple examples, but again, the principle is, "How can you bring the mission to the forefront even as you're beginning the board meeting itself?"

Al: Yeah. What a way to kind of keep everybody focused and on track of what you're trying to achieve! That's a great example. I haven't heard of many boards that actually do that. I read that, and I thought, "Wow! That's a takeaway all of us could learn from." In the back of the book, Peter, you provide some great tools for boards, including board self-evaluations, board surveys, annual CEO evaluations. If you were to pick a tool that's been most helpful for you as CEO, what would you say would be one of those tools?

Peter: You know, this might be an odd response, but I actually think the most significant one that is in the back is the board nomination process, because what we experienced is you have a very small margin of error when it comes to staff. One staff member can make an impact on the entire organization. That is true even to a higher degree with a board. One board member can change the conversation. They could have a significant impact on the organization.

Having a process by which board members are recruited, that is a really significant piece. One of the things we recommend is you do a whole lot of the vetting process before the individual even knows he or she is being considered. The benefit of that is then you don't paint yourself into a corner. I have been in several board conversations. I sit on a few other boards. There have been moments where the individual already knows they're being vetted, and it almost feels like, "Well, we can't *not* invite them at this point because then we would hurt their feelings."

So much of that can be avoided if you do a lot of the vetting up front. That's one of the practical tools we include that I think is significant to make sure the process you go through is a process that increases the likelihood (by God's grace) that you will recruit the right people to take that critical role of a board member for your organization.

Al: Well, thanks, Peter. You know, just looking through some of these tools at the back of the book is, again for our listeners, the Annual Board Member Affirmation Statement provided by Peter Teague at Lancaster Bible College, and from our mutual friend Chris Crane at Edify are Ten Nonprofit Board Member Profiles and kinds of things you might find as you interview various board members. Yeah, that's fantastic.

Well, Peter, we've certainly enjoyed all we've learned today. I'll bet you have one final thought you'd like to leave ministry leaders particularly about this board chair/CEO relationship and why that's so important. Give us one final thought.

Peter: Yeah, and I guess I'll just do a full circle to where we started: this idea of mission drift. When we did the research, we found examples I know that if the founding generation would have any idea how far the organization would drift, there would be a sense of deep sorrow. They would be asking the question, "What could I have done differently to prevent that drift of original mission?"

I think this book and this conversation... I think we're trying to have that conversation now. We're trying to have the conversation, "What are the practical things we can do to make sure our organization stays true to the calling, to the purpose we believe we've been given by God?" To do that, the board relationship is too important to simply believe it's going to happen. It won't!

The natural way relationships go is not to a position of greater strength if there's not intentionality. I guess the final piece of advice is be really intentional. Be *really* intentional about the dynamics, intentional about the purpose, intentional about the practices, intentional about the hard conversations.

Al: Yeah, absolutely! Finally, Peter, tell our listeners a few of the best ways to get their hands on this new book, *The Board and the CEO*. Is there a special website, or what would you recommend?

Peter: Yeah, it is available on Amazon. You could also go to peterkgreer.com. The benefit there is the proceeds go to HOPE International. That's another way to purchase it if individuals are interested.

Al: That's fantastic. Well, Peter Greer, president and CEO of HOPE International, thanks 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. Thanks for this book as well, *The Board and the CEO: Seven practices to protect your organization's most important relationship*.

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 in your organization. I'll see you next time 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.