



The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series
"Four Serious Culture Risks and a Solution to Each"
July 25, 2017

Deborah Limb

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. One of the smartest, most effective ways to value and improve the health of your organizational culture is to think about it through the mind of an engineer. Today you're going to hear from a Christian leader, executive vice president, and chief operating officer who has been trained as an engineer. Wait till you see what her analytic mind, her sense of teamwork, her attention to detail, her communication skills, and desire to learn along with her leadership skills can mean for your desire to increase the health of your organizational culture.

Today we have the pleasure of visiting with Deb Limb. Deb is the executive vice president and chief operating officer of CRISTA Ministries in the greater Seattle area. CRISTA has seven individual ministries with more than 1,200 employees. The mission of CRISTA is to love God by serving people. Hi, Deb, and welcome to our podcast.

Deborah Limb: Hi, Al. Thanks so much for inviting me.

Al: It's really a pleasure. I'm glad we've had a chance to do this. Say, Deb, I'm looking forward to what you have to share to help our listeners see the clear advantages and benefits of creating a healthy, even flourishing, culture. First, tell us a little bit about yourself and your role at CRISTA.

Deb: Well today, I'm the chief operating officer, and in that role, I have a chance to work with a really complex, diverse, and fantastic team. As you mentioned, our vision and mission is to love God by serving people. We do it in a number of different areas, everything from disaster relief, community development, all the way through education, broadcast ministries, senior living, camping. We have a lot on our plate!

What I do is I help gather information, collaborate across the system, and help our CEO, Bob Lonac, with the creation of our overall strategy. Then I work with each of our seven ministries to ensure the sub-ministry strategies we create are in alignment with our overall vision and mission. As you can imagine with 1,200 employees spread across multiple sites and multiple nations, it gets a little complex. So one of the main things is helping everyone stay linked to the big mission and vision and make sure what we do doesn't suboptimize or impact any other ministries in an unexpected way.

AI: Yeah! Deb, how long have you been on staff now at CRISTA?

Deb: I've only been here about two and a half years, so relatively new to ministry.

AI: Well, you were CRISTA's board chair before joining the organization. I remember meeting with you actually as the board chair as we reviewed Bob's 360. Tell us about your journey that led you to this role at CRISTA.

Deb: You know, coming to CRISTA was not in my life plan. I'm a mechanical engineer by training, and God wired me to be the kind of person who looks at every structure and tries to figure out how it's put together and how the loads flow through it. That's just how I'm wired. I had a great career in aviation. I was trained up as a mechanical engineer. I did a lot of years doing airplane repairs, quite frankly.

As my leadership role at Boeing expanded, I had a chance to lead a large number of teams working on fairly complex, challenging products, including the 787-fuselage development, 777, and the other widebody model support. I really had a fantastic time in aviation. The thing I loved about it was the problem solving. Over the years, I also volunteered with a number of organizations and was eventually asked to be on various boards, including CRISTA Ministries.

As you mentioned, I had served as the board chair for about three years during my stint on the CRISTA board. In my sixth year on the CRISTA board, God started working on me that a change was in my future. I did not know I was going to resign and move out of aviation and into ministry leadership, but the Lord kept giving me hints. At one point, he told me I needed to start cleaning out my office. After 26 years at the company, I had a lot of files from a lot of different projects I started jettisoning.

I also had a lot of different business colleagues who started to give me hints that they felt I was supposed to be doing something different. A number of people invited me to breakfast and said, "Hey, you know, I think you're supposed to leave Boeing and go join CRISTA Ministries. That was very interesting.

Finally at one point, the Lord really indicated to me... I felt he asked me whether I was ready to not only turn the page on aviation but close the book. I had to wrestle with that and finally decided, "Yes, indeed. I'm going to go work for you full-time and step out in faith." That's what I did. Now what I realize at CRISTA Ministries is the complexity of working on aviation products was perfect training for the complexity of CRISTA Ministries.

AI: Yeah, CRISTA is one of the more complex ministries we've worked with just because of the various natures of the organizations that are part of that umbrella. You know, I mentioned you were trained as

an engineer. You've talked about that. Having come from Boeing, what differences do you see in Christian organizations compared to your experience as a leader at Boeing, for example?

Deb: Well, it was really eye-opening when I first joined CRISTA. You know, when you first walk in and you come into this environment where the team is unified, they are calling on the Lord together corporately, individually, you see the work of God in community development, disaster, schools, camps, and senior living...all these different, amazing works, it's overwhelming.

It was an amazing time at first to see the blessings of God and see the amazing work that can be done when people unify around a cause bigger than themselves. Over time, what I also noted is, "Well, people are people, and we face the same common struggles in leadership in Christian organizations that we do in any organization."

While we may be unified around a belief system, we still face the challenges of, "How do I as a leader provide clear communication and assure it flows accurately through a system? How do I set clear responsibilities and help everyone understand priorities?" Then there's the ever-present challenge of building more leaders, helping people become all they're supposed to be in their Christian walk, serving wherever they're called.

The other thing I noticed in the Christian organization that is something we need to be mindful of and guard against is a tendency for complacency. I think it's easy to take this blessing of unification around a belief system and the opportunity and become maybe complacent and take it for granted. The other thing I've noticed is a tendency to avoid conflict. I think we as Christians want to show grace. We want to be forgiving. At some times, we may then let an issue that needs resolution go on too long.

Al: Yeah, one of the things I see over and over again is that conflict issue. Actually, you know, constructive conflict is a good thing. It's not something to shy away from, but that takes some time to understand that. You know, it's interesting. When you landed in your role at CRISTA, what were some of the key challenges you faced, particularly when it came to the overall health of the organizational culture?

Deb: Yeah, as I mentioned, CRISTA is pretty diverse. We're spread across multi-nations and multi-sites. So communication across the team was a challenge I recognized, making sure whatever you intend around strategy and priorities can penetrate into the different subcultures in each individual team.

Effective integration across organizational boundaries regarding priorities, regarding policies, regarding intent is super challenging. Again as I mentioned, the ability to resolve conflict effectively... You know, we spent a fair bit of time digging in to understand how to better hold crucial conversations so we could resolve issues and be able to be better at what we are doing.

Al: You know, CRISTA has completed the Best Christian Workplace Employee Engagement Survey. It always comes up with opportunities, areas for people to work on. How did you find the survey, and was it helpful in managing the health of the CRISTA culture as you got involved with it?

Deb: Certainly, it was very helpful! The first time I met you and we went over the survey, what I found really helpful is the ability to dive within the data. Being an analytical type, I like to be able to pinpoint, “Where is the issue happening? Where is the problem?” When we look at something at a top level, you can end up trying to fix something and hurt a bunch of other people and their processes at the same time if you don’t go and surgically repair what might be broken or deal with an issue that needs to be fixed.

I really appreciate the way the data is laid out, the way you can dig in. From my point of view, I look at these base rollups for an organization, but I also look at the trends (both positive and negative). I like that it’s laid out in themes and linked to the FLOURISH model.

One of the things I find really useful in that FLOURISH model is I link it to a set of leadership attributes that feed in. I want to be able to diagnose and come with the right, corrective action or have the team build the right, corrective action that actually fixes whatever is broken. So data has set you free, right? Being able to understand the data, being able to go fix the right thing, being able to do better than paint a broad brush, those are the things I found super useful about this approach.

Al: Yeah, and facts are our friends. We can actually use data for good work. You know, behind every successful organization, generally you find a good, healthy, even flourishing culture. Behind every culture, every healthy culture, you find a well-thought-out strategy to deal with the people, to help transform its people. What are some of the things you’ve addressed in the forms of a strategic plan, or at least some action steps that lead to positive outcomes when it comes to your culture transformation?

Deb: Well, we’ve done quite a bit of work in this area. One of the things we recognize is you have to define and communicate expectations, and you have to link them to your core values so people really know what to expect. One of the things I’ve experienced is sometimes we can talk about our strategies at such high levels that people don’t know what it really means.

We have some core values. Our three core values are being Christ-centered, service-driven, and professional. Now what those things mean underneath that is what’s really important. How does someone know whether they’re being Christ-centered enough? How does someone know what it looks like to have the excellence that should be demonstrated in a professional when we call that as a value?

What we did is we spent some time documenting the elements of excellence or the elements of what it looks like to be Christ-centered. Working with our teams, each of the leaders of our different ministries and resource groups developed a dashboard. They had dashboards when I arrived, but they were primarily financially focused.

They may have had what we call big rocks on them (big projects), but they didn’t have a lot around operations or measures that might drive the right culture, drive the right actions. You want to prevent some of the things that get in our way. As we make clear around the expectations, around what it means, around our core values and we built better operational measures, you can now drive behaviors or results in the right direction and get the outcomes you’re trying to reach.

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, healthy communication is something that has really improved since you've been there. You mentioned communication earlier. What are some of the ways CRISTA seeks the suggestions of your employees and involves your staff? What are a couple of those key improvements you've seen?

Deb: Well, we recognize, as you say, communication is a key factor. Someone said, "The problem with communication is the illusion that it occurs." So often as leaders we can be misunderstood. We may ask an employee for something, and what they deliver misses the mark. When we reflect, we realize, "Well, we weren't very clear in defining what we were going to do with the product we asked for."

Communication is key, and we want to make sure we set up a culture and opportunities for employees to tell us how it is going and what they think. Our dashboards help in that because they call out a number of different elements each team measures each month. You can reveal or be able to dig in and find things out in that way.

We also developed a plan for communication training, as I mentioned, focused on crucial conversations and making sure we can resolve conflict. We have cascade training where we're having managers teach their employees. This again, as you're teaching, enables you to get better at it, and it also open the dialogue up with your employees about, "How is it going?" and, "What am I doing that works well?" and, "What am I doing that doesn't work that well?"

We have operating rhythms in the different groups where they have staff meetings or all-hands meetings. There are built-in, scheduled times where there are chances for employees to give us feedback. The goal is to build trust and to actively seek input out in different meetings, different venues. In addition, we have the ability for employees to make anonymous feedback if they don't feel comfortable.

Now I have to say, we're far from perfect. We still have a lot to improve, but we are striving to get improved dialogue going and constantly monitoring, "How is it going in the different areas. How are each leaders? How are they doing? What trainer help might they need to get better at this?"

AI: Yeah, Deb, you've done some training. That's been one of your focus items. You do some training with your leaders...what? Four times a year? Is that what I recall?

Deb: Three times a year. Yeah. Three times a year.

AI: Okay. Tell me a little bit about what that looks like.

Deb: CRISTA holds leadership summits or leadership training several times a year. We do this so we can help our leaders continuously improve. One of the areas we spend a great deal of time on is communication. We know communication is key. We have developed plans for communication training and spent a lot of time focused on effective, crucial conversations.

We've gone so far as to come up with tip sheets and help people figure out how to set a safe environment to have one of these tough conversations, how to invest in the employee and think about what we want from the long-term about the relationship before we have a conversation. Then we've used a cascade training approach to help our managers flow the thought process out throughout their organization.

Now sometimes we hit other issues when it comes to training. We'll look at what the needs are and try and address them. We've taken on something new this last year where, instead of having the larger group of about 120, we actually took the top senior leaders and directors all off-site and had a retreat where we dug in and had very specific training about how to deal with some specific type of leadership need.

AI: Well, speaking of leadership, last year we looked at the improvements in CRISTA's results. We saw a lot of purple. Not everybody knows what that means, but we use the color purple in the Best Christian Workplace Engagement Survey to designate the driver we call *inspirational leadership*. We saw great results in Christian character questions, including leaders exhibiting the fruit of the Holy Spirit, compassion, and humility. Give us a favorite story of how CRISTA's improved culture advanced your mission of loving God by serving people.

Deb: There are a lot of wonderful stories about the progress we see. One example is the expansion of the work of our World Concern team. We strive to be a Christ-centered relief and development organization, and we're striving to enable lives and communities to be transformed. We do this by meeting physical needs and spiritual needs for the poor and marginalized around the world. We're in multiple nations.

To do this and do it authentically, inspirational leadership is an essential factor. The leader of our World Concern team is Jacinta Tegman. She continues to work within her organization on a culture of surrender to Christ, driving unity around a big God-guided vision and mission, and then ensuring she has great communication and collaboration across the organizations.

One of the great things we've seen is in the last year and a half, the team has made significant strides toward working together. They've expanded their support and impact in some remote areas of the world through our One Village Transformed effort. We've seen an increase in the number of villages

we're supporting from 13 in four countries to 23 in five countries. We're targeting to reach 32 next year. So it's a great story of success. I believe this clear inspirational leadership is a main factor in our ability.

AI: That's really remarkable! You're doubling and tripling the impact within a two- or three-year period. That's fantastic. You know, another significant outcome (and this was related to our previous conversation) has been your passion for leadership development. Last year, you took all your managers through the *Lead Like Jesus* curriculum. Tell us about that experience and maybe one way it's really helped your organization and culture.

Deb: Last year when we were working together and evaluating some of the common themes we had seen, there were a couple of areas that were really struggling where we just couldn't drive that right link between the leader and the teams. You recommended I contact Lead Like Jesus, and you aligned me with that organization.

It was really a fantastic opportunity for us because what I did is I picked up the book *Lead Like Jesus Revisited* and a study guide and started working through it myself just to check and see, "Is this the right fit?" It was very quickly clear to me this material is an excellent framework that enables individuals to look at their own leadership. Through the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of the leader applying themselves, you can quickly see what you need to work on. It's in a very simple, straightforward way.

After evaluating the themes, I went and talked to Bob. We decided, "Hey, this would be the right material to bring to the bigger team." We went ahead, and we had all of our leaders start reading the book and working through the workbook. We gave them a few months to do that, and then we brought Lead Like Jesus in to do one of their Encounter Trainings.

The training is just fantastic. It really helped solidify for a leader who you are in Christ. It helps bring our leadership skills and attributes we need to align with Christ into view with a biblical filter and helps us recognize where we as leaders may get fear or pride involved in our leadership. When we do it, we edge God out.

We had the whole team go through the big encounter after reading the book, and it's just been a fantastic thing for us. We went ahead and had 10 of our leaders certified to teach the Encounters. We are flowing that training throughout CRISTA. We have held a few of the Encounters already and have done one internationally. We did an Encounter with all of our teachers last week, and we plan to do an Encounter in Africa and possibly Mongolia.

It's just been fantastic. Again, individual framework enables a leader to look at how they're doing, figure out what they need to do to personally improve their leadership. It's really resulting in a change because it's really leading us back to reflect on, "What would Christ have me do in my leadership, in the way I approach my people, in the way I approach a challenge, and in the way I lead, communicate, and carry myself?" So it's very valuable. It's an excellent tool to link with the BCW work.

AI: That's fascinating. I was really glad to hear you just said you're training your teachers. People may not realize CRISTA includes the King's Schools, which is perhaps the largest Christian school system in the state. What did you hear about the teachers' reactions to the Lead Like Jesus training?

Deb: You know, I heard nothing but glowing remarks. I was told how touching it was and how it really helped people see interaction and leadership in a different way. We can tend to think leadership only involves people who are running a large organization, but each of our teachers is leading a classroom. Each of our teachers is speaking into the life of a pretty good-sized group of students. Each of us out there leads, so the teachers really appreciated it. It touched their hearts. I've heard just fantastic results out of it.

AI: Wow! That's great! You know, when you look at all that's happened, is there a best before-and-after improvement in the culture that Lead Like Jesus has made a difference for so far?

Deb: Yeah, there really is. As we've leaned into this, it's helped us work at a better collaboration level. As you start looking at yourself and asking yourself, "How often do my reactions or responses to challenges come out of a place of fear or pride?" what the Lead Like Jesus material taught us is (if I remember their data right), 70 percent of the time, we have some level of fear. The other part of it we can have some level of pride.

Both of those things holds out our ability to respond as leaders reflecting Christ in the right way. We at the leadership team, as we've gone through this, have seen a real change in our working together. There is far less conflict. I see less fear, less pride. As we unify, then we can drive that down, and our people can unify as well.

I see less strife, and I don't want to make it sound simple. It's *not* simple, because the work it takes to reach this requires a lot of self-surrender and recognition individually about the behaviors or the approach we each need to change. I can certainly tell you the Lord has been clear with me on quite a number of things I need to improve, and I'm working on trying to do that.

AI: Isn't that great how that works? Yes! You know, it would take a big room, but if your entire staff were gathered together right now, given how far you've come and the work you've done, particularly around leadership development, training communication, and Christian character, what one affirmation would you most want to share with your people?

Deb: You know, it is just an amazing blessing to work with this team at CRISTA. I am daily amazed by their dedication and their passion for their work. We have people who love Christ, and they strive to demonstrate it in the way they serve.

Whether they're teaching, whether they're serving a senior, whether they're running a camp activity, or whether they're serving in some disaster area, people go the extra mile. They set aside their own agenda. It is just a joy to work with them. There are many examples of people who walk out their faith through their call to teach, to coach, to do whatever it is to his glory. The affirmation is, "Well done! Well done!" I'm just so delighted to work with them.

AI: Yeah, and it's obvious when you're with them that that's really true. When you look at the overall improved health of your culture today, what are you most grateful for?

Deb: I'm very grateful for the improved engagement and the growing unity, trust, and collaboration. What we do is hard. There are mountains to climb frequently, but when we do that together, we can conquer whatever thing we face. You know? If we're not conflicting with each other, we can reach the conclusion God intends us to reach more quickly.

One thing I've really learned is God does not take us on a journey that's a straight line. As an engineer, I always like the shortest distance between two points. I'm grateful the Lord has taught me his plan is *not* to take us on the shortest distance. I'm grateful for that learning and the people we have who are committed to the journey.

AI: Yeah. You have a lot of them. That's for sure! Finally, given all we've talked about in these last few minutes, what would be one (perhaps your greatest) encouragement to your fellow Christian leaders who are listening right now?

Deb: It would really be to recognize leadership matters, and if he has called you to lead, he will equip you to lead. It's going to take a lot of effort on your part. We're all going to struggle and wrestle with external and internal challenges, things that disappoint us. We will wrestle with strife that comes out of fear or pride.

The lack of trust that can creep in to our organizations is unsettling, so we all have these pressures, but as leaders when we truly surrender our heart, our agenda, our performance, and our future to the Lord and then lean in to the effort it takes to continue to work at being great leaders for Christ, we're going to see our reach grow. We're going to see our effectiveness grow. We'll see trust develop. It all starts with the heart of the leader. I encourage my fellow leaders on the journey, "May the Lord lead you, and may you follow."

AI: Yep! Leadership is from the inside out. There's no question about that. You have to have something within in order to offer it to others in leadership. One more question. Deb, you know, there are a lot of leaders who come into Christian workplaces from the secular, from the marketplace. Are there any specific recommendations on how to make that transition you've made so effectively?

Deb: You know, reflecting on it, making the transition into a Christian organization is fairly tough. There's a lot that's different about it. If you're called to do it, you lean in to the Lord, and you ask him how to do it. You keep learning, and you're going to be transformed.

The thing you have to do is be patient and ask yourself, "What was I doing in the past that maybe wasn't as effective as it could have been? Maybe there are aspects to the way I led or served in the past that don't match here. Maybe they're not the right thing." It's looking at what you learned and what you now do and being open to change on both sides without judgment, without the wrong evaluation. So patience, reflection, and prayer.

Al: Yep! That is a definition of learning agility right there. Deb Limb, executive vice president and chief operating officer of CRISTA Ministries, 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.

Deb: Well, thanks, Al. You're welcome, and thank you for inviting me.

Al: Oh, it's been a great pleasure. To our listeners, thank you for investing this time in your workplace culture today. This is Al Lopus reminding you that a healthy culture drives greater impact and growth in your organization. I'll see you again soon on the Flourishing Culture Podcast.

Male: For a free transcript of today's podcast, visit blog.bcwinstitute.org. 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.