



**The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series**  
“Healthy Staff Culture as a Very Influential Tool”  
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Allan Kelsey

**Female:** Today’s podcast is brought to you by BCWI’s 360 Leadership Assessment.

**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 a special treat for you. My guest is Allan Kelsey, the associate senior pastor of Gateway Church in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex area. With over 30,000 weekend attenders on several campuses, Gateway is one of the largest and fastest growing churches in the country. I believe Gateway’s growth over the past 17 years is possible because of its healthy culture that Allan has helped to cultivate. Hi, Allan, and welcome again to the Flourishing Culture Podcast.

**Allan Kelsey:** It’s great to be with you again. Thanks so much, Al, for the invitation and for all the work you do to help churches like ours keep the main thing the main thing.

**Al:** Thank you. Allan, tell us a little bit about your background and what brought you into your current role at Gateway Church.

**Allan:** I was originally born in South Africa, so if I speak goofy it’s because of that. I think over time you’ll eventually hear the accent, if you don’t hear it right away. The thing that brought me to Gateway and to the contribution I make these days as Gateway’s chief people officer... It was a three-day weekend with five of my buddies. We’d gone on a Wild at Heart retreat, and our idea was to climb five 14,000-foot peaks in three days.

I was in charge of the conversation on that day, and what God had impressed on me was to talk about the intersection of the God-given, innate abilities (or *talents*, if you like) we all have and where that intersects with our destiny, where those two lines cross; just to spend three days at that intersection talking about what that might look like. It changed me dramatically.

**Al:** Wow, what a great place. Climbing 14,000 feet five times. That's a crazy group of guys you had there.

**Allan:** It was. For all of our listeners, I just have to say, deeply consider whether you might even take something like that on, because it was a little silly. We were in Colorado, so, to be fair, we didn't start at zero. We started at 8,000 or 9,000 feet, but still, the air gets pretty thin up there, and by the time you squeeze the fifth one in you're pretty spent.

**Al:** You were also a competitive athlete before that, weren't you, Allan?

**Allan:** That's true. I spent quite a bit of time swimming. It was my swimming ability God gave me that brought me with the opportunity to come out to the United States. I ended up at the University of Nebraska as a swimmer on their men's team.

**Al:** What were some of the challenges you and your leadership team were facing? What things in your culture needed attention, especially as you came on board? What wasn't working? What needed to be done?

**Allan:** It feels like Gateway had been running and growing very rapidly for a good period of time, and then it began to feel like God was starting to move the goal post for us and sort of change what a win felt like for us. In order to be able to respond, we had to make adjustments to our ministry. We had to think about the events we were running and the number of them and the quality of them. We had to think about our budget and our staff and what we really focus on. It took us a few years to understand what God meant by those five focuses and to understand what was wrong about each of them.

**Al:** You do a number of events there at Gateway throughout the year, don't you?

**Allan:** We really do. We don't do a lot of big corporate events. We don't run a lot of conferences, but we sure give our people a lot of options to choose from. What we discovered is in an effort to be ultimately serving, what we did is ultimately overwhelm.

**Al:** You mentioned God moving the goal post. If you had ignored that challenge you've just described and if things had just run their course, what, in your mind, would have happened? What would have been the outcome for the organization if you hadn't taken a look at that?

**Allan:** You know, at first, probably nothing. It would look like we were feeling just a pinch past our prime. Things were still going well and we still felt good, but the truth of it is we would ultimately die a slow death. We would have just been continuing to do yesterday's things, living off of yesterday's instruction, when God had completely moved on, and it would eventually become an empty shell.

**Al:** That's something we all worry about, isn't it?

**Allan:** It really is.

**Al:** And how do we stay fresh? How do we stay in the flow of where God wants us to be? Fortunately, things didn't work out that way. In fact, Gateway continues to be vibrant and growing, and you've experienced a culture transformation, in a way. Gateway has conducted the Best Christian Workplace Engagement Survey now four years in a row, and each year your survey scores have reflected a very healthy to flourishing workplace culture, which is fantastic. With your broad leadership background, what would you say are two or three takeaway areas, maybe benefits, of measuring the health of your staff culture?

**Allan:** I've heard you say, "You can't fix what you can't see." The Best Christian Workplace Institute's survey really helps us identify what's not working and where there is opportunity for growth. Everybody has room for growth, and the objectivity of that anonymous, outside assessment really lends credibility to the quality of the responses we get. It helps us value the answers we're getting.

On top of that, as a strong supporter, a believer in the StrengthsFinder, too, just the principle of the strengths you have and if you add something to it you can get an exponential outcome from it all is a real value for us. I like to know where we can improve, and I like to know where we're succeeding, and the survey really gives us both.

**Al:** We've been really impressed with your focus on people. We've written about your staff covenant in the past. Why has this been helpful to invest your leadership's time and energy to articulate a staff covenant, something in writing that talks about the way you're going to treat people? Tell us a little bit about the covenant and why you spent time doing that.

**Allan:** I think a lot of the times organizations like ours do anything it's not just because we want to arbitrarily add something else to the mix, because we're all kind of busy. It's because we're trying to answer a pain point. There's a question in the system that needs to be answered. The question we found was that the rules, the general guidelines were making it clear what regular play looked like, but when there was room for interpretation, that's when stuff got weird, and that's where all the pain lived.

We needed to be able to bring some clarity to how we thought playing should happen when the rules are open to interpretation. I know this may not be the North American audience's preferred sport, but

soccer, as a whole, is growing worldwide. Two referees may blow the whistle on a play very differently. One referee may watch a striker and a defender rub shoulders and let them play on, and the very next ref will blow the whistle to stop play on the same exact play.

When that happens in an organization, it sends a very confused message to the staff. They just don't know, "Is this in or is this out?" So we created a social covenant that says, "This is what it looks like when there's room for interpretation. This is what's in, this is what's out, and when stuff *gets* out, here's how you get it back into play."

**Al:** So if somebody feels they've been hurt in some way in a conversation, there's a process to work through?

**Allan:** Yeah. We've thankfully adopted that process so efficiently it's a part of our culture now. We use the American football analogy, and we'll just say, "I'm throwing a flag on that play," and even make the motion with your hand as if you were throwing the flag. When somebody does that, we all stop. It doesn't matter what your level in the organization is. We all stop. Then the expectation is the offender will give the offended individual an apology and then follow with two meaningful affirmations for that person to help reestablish a relational connection with them. We hold each other accountable to it, and I see it happening all over our organization.

**Al:** That's fantastic. Gateway has seen explosive growth in attendance and locations, the number of staff you've had over the years. A couple of years ago, you felt it was important to document and communicate the core elements of your culture to your staff, so you created the Gateway Church Field Guide. What is it, and how has it benefited your people and, in turn, Gateway's overall ministry?

**Allan:** Oh my gosh. We were pregnant with that thing for 18 months. I'm so glad it's done now. What we realized is you can't really multiply what you haven't clarified, so we really investigated to understand our culture. We wanted to clarify it as much as we could. So we investigated, we polled people, we clarified it, got strong agreement on it corporately, and then produced a document that really illustrated what the collection of our cultural beliefs is to help all of our current and our new staff understand our culture.

Truthfully, I think a lot of culture is caught. Some of it can be taught, but the document is not intended to be the primary source of culture, because I believe a lot of it is caught, but it does settle in new staff any anxiety about who they will become, and it settles any questions about meaning in the culture between people. It's just good to have a final say, that if there's ever a question there's ultimately an answer.

**Al:** Describe what that field guide looks like. I know you have a couple of different sizes. You know, just a little bit of a summary.

**Allan:** We placed the field guide in as many places as people can see it. It's poster size in the hallways. It's a smaller poster size in all of the bathroom stalls, so as men and women, in their separate experiences, are contemplating the infinities they can be reminded of how we like to play and what we value in our culture. Then it's printed in book form in two different sizes, one a regular 8x10 book size, and then another one that's really small that can almost fit in the palm of your hand that's sort of a pocket size you can carry around with you easily. Then it's also, obviously, available in digital format for laptops and phones.

**Al:** It's really an attractive piece. Beautiful pictures. Very well done.

**Allan:** Thank you.

**Al:** A great tool. Another innovative program Gateway has invested in is staff and leadership development. Your idea of First Tuesdays has been replicated by other churches across the country. I was just on the phone debriefing one this morning before our discussion. Give us an overview of this First Tuesday, and tell us the story of how Gateway has benefited from this really smart and innovative strategy.

**Allan:** Well, it started with a very simple realization. I'll just say we found it reprehensible that all of the license-carrying professionals in our world have to participate in some kind of continuous education in order to keep their licensure, but for whatever reason, when it comes to the church, it just seems like we've adopted a once-and-done approach. So we created First Tuesday to systematically invest in our staff to help them grow and to leverage the collective wisdom we have to help our organization solve its own problems.

So we invest in First Tuesday, and that involves a staff chapel in the morning, some family time, you know, updates, "This is what's coming up." We break for lunch, and then we get into some pods that are solving local and church-wide issues, and we do some management development and growth and some group advocate meetings. We just fill the afternoon with opportunities for people to improve what they do and how they do it.

**Al:** You've gone through and developed key competencies, kind of levels of competencies, and you've integrated those competencies with this training, I understand.

**Allan:** Yeah, we did, because we felt like we wanted our staff to understand, if they're going to advance within the organization, what might make them eligible for consideration. Prior to it, it was a feeling. "I feel like they ought to" or "They deserve" or all of these very squishy words that aren't very quantifiable.

So we designed a set of competencies that we felt like at an associate campus pastor level you'd need to perform *here*, but if you get promoted to the campus pastor level, then there's a new set of competencies that are needed for that level, and you won't be eligible to be considered for that role until we can see you have some measurable competency in those new outputs.

**AI:** Really well thought through. It's a great benchmark for churches, for parachurch mission organizations, even for Christian-owned business owners who listen.

I trust you're enjoying our podcast today. We'll be right back after an important word for leaders.

**Female:** Discover your key strengths as a leader and identify your greatest development opportunities. It's yours with the 360 Leadership Assessment by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. Gain a true, accurate measure of your own leadership from a biblical worldview. Join the more than 1,000 leaders and their colleagues now putting their 360 insights and lessons to work every day.

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**AI:** Now let's hear more from today's guest.

Allan, as you know, at BCWI we believe in a strength-based approach, that that effectively builds a healthy culture, so I'm curious about your experience and even credentialing as a Gallup Strengths coach. How have you integrated this skill to set it into your work and teaching at Gateway? Tell us a little bit about that.

**Allan:** What I've discovered through just talking with people on my learning is that of the two strategies, either moving away from something or moving toward something as a philosophy or a strategy for life, only one of those two is permanently sustainable. You won't find continuous momentum that is run by or operated by a strategy that says, "I'm running away from this thing." Eventually, you're going to put so much distance between you and that thing it no longer has a motivating force. It's done. It's over.

You can only permanently be motivated by something you're moving toward, and what better to move toward than the strength that exists within you that God has given you, because it aligns with his best plan for your life and it aligns with your best contribution to the people around you. It's perhaps the most effective way through which God can get what he wants from heaven down into earth, and we pray that way. That's how Jesus invited us to pray. "May your kingdom come. May your will be done."

God really captured my heart about the potential that's in people and the strengths they possess, and for me, the most powerful tool to illuminate that kind of motivation is the Strengths tool. I love it. I love using it. I use it to awaken the power that's in people, to help them see it academically, not just intuitively, and I ended up writing a book about it and how it's used in marriage and have really helped thousands of marriages with that too. I just see it in so many things now. It's almost silly.

**Al:** You actually have a ministry, in a sense, working with married couples and bringing Strengths to the marriage. You and your wife work together on this, I understand.

**Allan:** It's true. I just learned so much through using our strengths in our marriage, and it began to heal so many challenges and answer so many questions. It just felt like too much of a good information to sit on and not share with others. We love being able to do that when we can.

**Al:** That's great. Considering all the work you and many others have done to grow Gateway's culture, you must have more than one favorite story, a before and after story of how your culture turned around for the better.

**Allan:** I have this really fresh example in my mind. I noticed that, as a group of people, we were afraid to fail, so we had to change the culture associated with that. Joseph Grenny wrote some amazing material on changing culture, and he reminds us in one of his books there are at least four to five different efforts that are needed to be effected if lasting results are to be seen when you're trying to change culture.

Through the help of the BCWI, the results from our survey, we saw that we were beginning to stop our innovation. We just weren't taking risks. It seemed to be that there was a source of fear over being the one individual who might try something and then it would upset or change our positive growth. So I tried to get everybody comfortable with the idea of failure. I tried repackaging failure in a different way and telling them, "It's okay. We need it. Don't worry about it."

But boy, I'll tell you, I couldn't get our staff to buy it. I could not get our staff into it. Then God showed me the challenge I had with their failure to adopt my perspective... It wasn't an idea issue; it was a word issue. So I switched the word from *failure* to *prototyping*, and it completely worked. Now we have people who are regularly talking about prototyping in the organization.

The reason is then the phrasing associated with it means I'm going to try something and it's okay if it doesn't work, because that's what prototypes are literally built to do, but I'm going to learn from it, and the next time we may well get it right. Even just changing that language was a big deal, but it took us a while to understand where the problem was (you guys helped us with that) and then to understand how to fix it.

**Al:** That's really interesting, because for high-achieving leaders, they're often achievers, and the greatest fear of achievers... When you look at the Enneagram, for example, Type Three, the Achiever, the fear of failure is something we are afraid of, even though we know that when we do fail it's a good thing because we grow from it. But changing the word to *prototyping*. That's something all of our listeners can appreciate.

You and I and every other person listening to our conversation are well aware that all organizations go through growth spurts and times of consolidation, and it's part of the growth process. Over the past year, Gateway's leadership decided to trim some of its staff expenses, yet even after that your staff engagement scores remained at a very high level. That's unusual from our experience, as we work with organizations like yours. Talk a little bit about the challenges and the lessons learned as Gateway made staff reductions while still desiring to maintain a strong and healthy culture.

**Allan:** Over time, what I've learned is if you know you're going to stare at pain, one of the ways to minimize the effect of it is to perhaps slow the process down or maybe lengthen the off-ramp or the on-ramp of that change. So in our transition, we chose to double down in communication and transparency and to prioritize making the right decisions for the *people* rather than favoring an expeditious process.

So even though we knew there would be pain, if we just slowed the process a little bit it would give people an opportunity to talk, to be heard, and we would value the individual. Even though that could be seen as potentially lengthening the process, we just made sure we left nobody behind. Also, the BCWI told us one of the areas we were repeatedly weak in is on this assessment of taking others' thoughts into consideration when making big decisions.

That was very instrumental to us as we faced this big change. What we chose to do was we decided we would literally talk to every single employee, from the very top of our organization down to the very, very bottom, before we began our transition, to hear from everybody, give them an opportunity to speak into what was coming. That ended up in 23,500 minutes of meetings, listening to our staff tell us what's on their hearts. It turned out to be an unbelievably healthy investment in our staff.

**Al:** I recently talked with an organization that said a new person came in and did a listening tour of the staff. I don't think they talked to every staff person, but your leadership talked with every person before you actually did that.

**Allan:** Yes, we did.

**Al:** Fantastic. We believe a healthy culture is a true and worthy end in itself. It's really important in Christian organizations just to have a healthy culture, but we also believe a healthy culture, a

flourishing culture leads to organizational growth and ministry impact. How has having a healthy culture influenced Gateway's impact and outcomes?

**Allan:** I have this phrase... Most people look at me weird when I say it, but I think a church's culture is sort of hung out on the church's reputation billboard. What I mean by that is your reputation sort of publicizes your culture to the watching world. It's a direct translation. It's one for one. It's real time, it's live, and it's changing all the time. Gateway has a reputation for being a very healthy place. That *is* our reputation.

Now the truthful thing about a reputation is that you don't give it to yourself. We didn't always have that reputation, but our choice to focus on true freedom of our staff and our congregation has been a cornerstone of our culture. *Freedom*, by our definition, is not the absence of something, like the absence of an addiction or the absence of my alcoholism or something, but rather the presence of someone, that one being Jesus. That's how we define *freedom*.

Additionally, only free people can free people, obviously, so our choice to become healthy, as an individual first and then as an organization, was kind of a sequence, and it started with one person at a time. But it's also a little bit like an airline's safety video, when you say you have to start with the people. They encourage you to put your own oxygen mask on first before you help others. We have to deal with our own ocular planks before we can start picking on the splinters in other people's eyes.

**Al:** That's great advice and a great story. I bet you have another story you could tell us about building a healthy culture and how it has caused your people to really flourish.

**Allan:** How did you know? I have stories for days, Al. Come on now. That's like "Sic 'em" to a dog. On our First Tuesdays, periodically, like two times a year, we do these things called *workshops*. The day is really focused on practical experience to help people figure out a particular thing, because I know the 70/20/10 rule says I remember 10 percent of what I hear, 20 percent of what happens in relationship, and 70 percent of what I physically get to do myself.

So I build these workshop days, where our staff will physically get to do something themselves as an attempt to deal with an issue or a cultural phenomenon we want to change in the organization. One we did recently involved 12 unbroken, uncooked, tall spaghetti sticks; a yard of tape; a yard of yarn or string; and an oversized marshmallow. Our staff was broken up into groups of 8 to 10, and they were given all of those resources and then told to build the tallest standing structure they could in 17 minutes.

What they didn't know was I completely set them up by giving them that little bit of information, because by the time it was finished, only 17 percent of our staff had a standing structure. By far, the largest majority of them, it all failed. The reason is they spend most of their time planning and then

think they can construct it in the last five minutes. Really, the best way to approach it is to prototype. You build it a little bit, test it, and see how it works. If it doesn't, break it down and build it again.

It was a wonderful workshop day with everybody in the same experience, laughing, yelling at each other. At the end, when the folks who walked around to see who had the tallest structures were moving around to determine the winners, some of our teams were throwing marshmallows at each other and trying to skew the measurements. It was just a really fun day, and in the end, their learning over the idea of failure and the value of prototyping was personal and real to them. It's a fantastic way to change culture.

**Al:** What a great story. I love that. So you have these teams working on a project, and again, your point is you want them to prototype and to move things along and to be innovative and get it going. Wow. So a healthy culture... That's a worthy end in itself. You described also having fun in the process. That created a lot of fun energy. How about another story? How has growing your culture influenced Gateway's ministry impact?

**Allan:** I think sometimes people downplay the value of culture and what kind of an attractive draw it can be. A part of the reason we love to invest in it heavily is we consider it a very influential tool to drawing people to our congregations and to church. Our freeing message and our healthy reputation, we feel, draws people like bees to honey, because people love excellence, they love order, and they love health.

I think it's why 80 percent of the commercials we see are playacted by healthy, virile, orderly people doing admirable things. Building an organization that displays health and excellence and that kind of thing for the congregation to see makes the church attractive to people, and they feel drawn to the message and to the location. We use our culture as a retention tool.

**Al:** Well, Allan, I've really enjoyed what we've learned today. It has really been drinking from a fire hose. I love the way you connect culture to the Lord's Prayer. "May your kingdom come and may your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Culture has a role to that. Also the way you discovered early on that innovation was kind of drying up at Gateway, and you discovered that through the engagement survey, and how you were able to put steps in place to improve that through prototyping.

Gosh, I love your image that your culture is really hung on a billboard, as people see the culture of a church, and they would be attracted to it like bees to honey. Those are great takeaways. Given all you've experienced, Allan, in the ongoing transformation and greater health of your culture, give us one final thought you'd like to leave with leaders.

**Allan:** I'm convinced it's really not the answers that matter, because they're available for anything. It's really the questions that differentiate us. In my opinion, I feel like those are necessary for church

leaders as they grow their organizations, but even to the degree that they're willing to use *your* tool, Al, the BCWI... I think the BCWI asks the right questions. What each organization may or may not do with the answers they get from that is what really sets you apart.

**Al:** Well, Allan Kelsey, chief people officer and associate senior pastor of the Gateway Church in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex area, thank you for sharing your wisdom, insights, and stories, and thank you for extending your ministry to the leaders who have been listening and benefiting from all we've shared today.

**Allan:** You're welcome. It's been a pleasure. Thanks, Al.

**Al:** And 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 influence and impact 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](http://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 the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, helping Christian organizations set the standard as the best, most effective places to work in the world.