



The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series

“Human Resources Can Improve Your Staff Culture “

July 2, 2018

Chris Taylor

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 on the Flourishing Culture Podcast. Here’s a question. What could have motivated one of the most innovative churches in the country to invest in a human resources function to build their staff culture? The answer just might speak to where your church organization or business can improve the health of your own culture. With me in the studio is Chris Taylor, who serves as the director of human resources for Seacoast Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Hi, Chris, and welcome to our podcast.

Chris Taylor: Hey there, Al. Thanks very much for having me, and I’m glad to be here with you.

Al: To set the table, Chris, Seacoast is known as one of the most innovative churches, and it’s often credited with being the first multisite church in the country. Give us a distinctive quality about Seacoast and a little bit about your background and what led you to your current role.

Chris: I would say the thing that attracted us to Seacoast is the same DNA that attracted people for years. Originally, the message that got out about Seacoast was it was the church for people who had given up on church. I think we see some of the same things. My family and I have never given up on church, luckily, but the types of leaders who have developed and thrived here in this culture are incredible. The humility from a megachurch pastor on down that you find here is also incredible.

For me, my background... I was raised in a Christian home, but I worked in the secular side of things for almost two decades. I spent 17 years with General Motors, and in doing that I was in the HR function, change management, labor relations, and worked here in the States and then in Korea, Australia, China, and Japan.

About three years ago, I decided I did not want to spend the rest of my career in corporate. I wanted to impact the world. I wanted to be in not-for-profit and hopefully to do something involving the church or with the church. So we left Korea, moved back to the States, not certain what we were going to do. Luckily, GM blessed me for another three years and let me commute from South Carolina to Detroit, and then I finally decided the time had come to step away and stepped right into Seacoast.

Al: That's a great story. I remember meeting you. It was about three years ago. Tell us the story of how you and I actually met. As I recall, you were just getting started. What were some of your first impressions of being on church staff but also looking at the Best Christian Workplace survey results? What did the survey scores tell you about the health of Seacoast's staff culture?

Chris: Yeah, you came to South Carolina to support us when we rolled out the survey the first year to the staff, and then we got to know each other virtually as we were going through "How are we going to do this for the first time ever when this church is 27 years old, the first time we've gone deep and asked for this kind of feedback?"

From my own background with employee engagement surveys, I believe I was prepared to remember what I've always been taught, and that is look at the data and listen to what the data is saying always. You have to be so careful not to take one peripheral comment someone wrote and run off on a tangent with it. When we stepped back, it began to paint a picture.

We did the survey right as I came on board here at Seacoast, so I didn't have any pre-survey comparisons, really. I didn't know the culture prior to the survey. It was within weeks of my coming here that we did it. So it was important for me to sort through the data and begin to put the information into buckets. What is it that people like? The general message that came out was something I think we're going to talk about a bit later today. I remember a concern we had up front was "How will the leadership receive this truth they've never received in this format or clarity before?"

Al: Yeah, that's always a challenge. You've described your culture and your pastors as intuitive and feeling-oriented, and sometimes this data can really hurt, can't it?

Chris: Absolutely.

Al: You're speaking to some of the culture challenges and opportunities at the church. What specific things needed attention? What wasn't working that came out in that first survey?

Chris: The general message we saw right away was, “Hey, guys, we have never doubted how much you love us. You care for us. We would probably give you an arm if you needed it, but we’re not sure where we’re going. We get lost a lot. We’re not happy with our pay, and we want to be better developed. While you’re at it, please develop my boss as well.” Those were the key things, if you remember.

Al: Yeah, exactly. I do remember how it really came across strongly. There was a high level of trust between leaders and staff, and the staff felt that, yes, the leaders really loved them as the staff, but, as you say, these issues came out. I remember a document you created early on that outlined a long-term strategy. I was really impressed with it. A strategy for improving the staff culture through a highly functioning HR department. Walk us through some of the original plans you had that you wanted to implement and now, over three years, *have* implemented at Seacoast.

Chris: It was the best of times and the worst of times, Al. I hit the ground running. I was excited. I wanted to make a difference, and I think I hit the ground running too hard because it was so important to me that I show my worth. I came out talking about a lot of things we could do, and I realized what I needed to do was step back and learn my new culture and remember, “Hey, I’ve moved into their house, and I need to understand them.”

To do things visually, to lay things out visually is a help for me, and in our culture... The staff culture here, if you talk Myers-Briggs, is an ENFP culture. For all of you gurus and geeks like me out there, you kind of know what that means. So I needed to back off all of the action plans but to show, “Here’s what we could be if we wire things up the right way.” That’s the word I like to refer to. So we laid out a three-year strategy.

Seacoast *is* very innovative. You can see and feel the energy as soon as you get here and spend time here, but that also means that as that ENFP culture kicks in, we’re not always excited about processing detail. The first year the plan was really around doing some of the most boring things, some people might say, and that’s putting the wiring behind the walls so that whenever we flip the light switch a year or five years down the road the light comes on.

We have a history of a lot of things that were developed in Seacoast and then vanished, and that was some of the feedback I was given by the leadership team that recruited me. They said, “We want to do better in this area.” So that’s something we agreed we can do, and that’s when I laid out the plan I shared with you.

“It’ll take about three years. We have to get some fundamental basics right, and that’ll get kind of boring, but what it gives us is repeatable process so that long after you and I are gone things are still working. When somebody goes in to take a learning course or initiative, the fifteenth class is every bit as good as the first class.” Those kinds of things.

That wiring in the beginning, including evaluating all of our positions, something we'd never done, and that's a process... We looked at every job, determined its size, its scope. We then, because of the feedback on the compensation, updated pay ranges and midpoints. We did teaching sessions for leaders and for the staff as well on the new system, and that is what helped us get the first win, I would call it, which was upgrading people's pay.

Al: Well, I think we're going to talk more about that. As you were getting your feet on the ground in that first year, we also saw great progress both in teamwork and communication. First give us an action step that really began to get traction with your culture, and then tell us a story of how a practical outcome improved the health of your culture and furthered the church's ministry.

Chris: Following that first survey, our leader... Josh Surratt is our senior pastor, and his dad, Greg Surratt, founded the church. They were kind of in a transition period when we started this. This was one of the first big initiatives that hit the table when Josh stepped into the lead pastor role, so he stood really tall to the leadership team and said, "We have to open our arms and welcome this feedback. It's going to hurt, and we'll take some time to mourn. Before we go out and address the staff, let's let it soak in."

But after they did that, he wanted to pull everybody in, and an idea we came up with was called *culture builders*. Culture builders were just that. "How can we take people from every level of Seacoast and have them work on initiatives and make things better?" We identified our handful of key initiatives, one of them being comp and benefits like we talked about, another being performance goals, metrics, and we had two executive team members champion each one of those groups and then bring in people who wanted to raise their hand and say, "I have an interest in this area."

We would then begin to run those, and at our all-staff meetings we would report down on those, and at our executive team meetings we would learn more about what was going on with those. I think it really gave people a sense of shared ownership. One of the mistakes you can make when you do a survey like this is to say, "Hey, we've got it. Thank you for dumping your comments at our door. We'll go and try to fix everything and hope it works."

Al: First of all, I like that comment that Josh really encouraged the team to take some time to process the data before stepping out too quickly, and that gave the team some space in order to process before you moved into these culture builder teams. That's a great structure, this culture builder team concept. I bet you have another great example of how an innovative strategy affirmed your people and impacted the ministry.

Chris: Well, I just happen to have another good idea. There have been a lot of fun things that have come out of this. There have been some hard moments but a lot of fun things. I want to give one more plug to our lead pastor Josh and his wife Lisa, who are both very involved here at Seacoast. They are

almost total opposites when you look at personality type again, so when they play off of each other, it's amazing.

The thing I really enjoy watching in them is they see different parts of the problem or equation. We all should hope we have someone who is almost our opposite for whom we have mutual respect. One of the things they did was said, "You know what? Let's kind of blow up this all-staff beast. We've gotten mixed feedback for years, and let's really redo it." So they pulled me and a few others in to help with that.

We really stepped back and looked at what would make a difference and how we could take the survey feedback and our core values that go from finding God all the way up to making a difference in the kingdom and make every meeting have something to do with those topics. It's not a program of the month so that every three quarters you're going to be hearing about the topic you heard about *this* quarter.

They proposed a yearlong schedule. "Here's what we're going to hit, here's what's going to support that, and here's what we're going to show that we're doing in terms of culture builders." Just putting that, the feedback (we've seen it in the last two surveys) is so much better, because it's really designed with the current needs of Seacoast in mind.

Al: You *have* had great support. It's interesting to see Josh and Lisa onstage together as they talk about things and play off of each other. They really build strength as a result. Let me shift gears. I know you can appreciate the fact that compensation is always a sensitive topic in churches. You've had labor relations experience. Compensation is *always* a sensitive topic. I'm sure it's true at Seacoast as well, yet the compensation and benefits area is one you have made a lot of progress on within the past three years. Tell us about your approach and the practical benefit to your people that has had.

Chris: It is an area that has been quite a journey here, and I would say it's a sensitive topic almost anywhere in the world that you go. The thing we know about compensation is it really is not a motivator of people. If you go back and study Maslow's hierarchy, he'll tell you it's not going to motivate them for long, but, man, is it a de-motivator if you don't have it right. We knew we had some work to do there, so we needed to understand what was fair and what was right.

We did an external benchmarking using megachurch compensation surveys and data, which Seacoast had used for some time, but in addition to that, we did this job evaluation process I mentioned earlier, and that was kind of a scientific structure we built to look at how big a job is. Al, if you're at the top of the organization and I'm at the bottom, how many levels are there between us? If you say, "Chris is my go-to strategic guy..." If I have all the strategy, then what you have is lower. If I have the decision making, what you have is lower. We have so many points we look at across the whole organization.

Now, you talk about putting people into a coma. It did for the first few months, but we use that process every time we have a new job here, and we have pastors who are now fluent in the language because we made them the leveling committee, not HR. We're in it too, but we get in and we talk about, "But remember, Bob's job oversees *this* many people, and Mary's is going to be *this* much different." They're talking objectively. What that does is gives a foundation where there is objective data underneath compensation, and then it's easy to go in and say, "Let's get our pay ranges in place."

I can say from that objective data that all of these jobs fit into this range. What that helped us do was say, "A lot of our people are underpaid, so this year, when we have a pay increase, we're going to have two components. Everyone is going to get the performance increase they've earned, but a number of people are going to get an additional increase we call 'catch-up.' We're catching you up to get you into your new pay level. We will do this over a period of two years, and that will have you where you should have been."

So we did that. We set aside quite a bit of money, and we went to work on that. What we have now is there's no black box. People are not distrusting about, "Well, Al makes more than Mary." He *may* make more or *she* may make more, but the issue is they're both in the band they belong in. Then when people have questions about "What could I do to make more?" we're able to say, "Well, let's sit down and look at your range."

We give the ranges to people. We don't hide them. "Here's where you are to the midpoint, which is our target, and this is what you'd need to do. It's on the performance and behavioral side." A lot of that came into place with metrics we've put in place that I think we'll have the opportunity to talk about shortly.

Al: So here you are putting in structure in an ENFP culture. That's not always easy, but congratulations for sticking through it so people can actually see the benefit of it and how it is helpful in any kind of an organization that gets to the size you are. You've also begun to do a fair amount of training that has impacted the emotional intelligence and competency of your staff. First, what is emotional intelligence and competency, and why is it important at Seacoast?

Chris: Emotional intelligence, when you're asking a leadership development guy, is everything. Emotional intelligence most simply is understanding and managing our emotions as well as understanding others' emotions. Really understanding them. That's hard to do, because emotions move really quickly if you study the brain. You have one, you say something awful, and then rationale catches up and you say, "Oh, I shouldn't have said that. Let me call back and apologize." That's why we all have those stories we can share about writing that letter or email but thankfully never sending it.

So understanding emotions takes a lot of work, and it means I need to understand how I am wired and what I'm most likely to do in good situations as well as situations I deem to put me in the fight or flight

risk, if you would. So we start here. We're just getting this rolling as we're working now on development, which was such a huge request from our people in the survey.

We've done a lot of work on understanding self, and we use several tools to help people do that, but the reason we're doing that is so people can understand "How am I wired versus what are behaviors I can reasonably change, and the root of it all, how do I realize when there are things I'm doing that I'm not aware of? How is it that I communicate to you, "This is what I need in this relationship?"

If I don't do that, you're not a mind reader, so do you go the next 10 years and not be able to read my mind and I lead very passive-aggressive and angry with you? It doesn't have to be that way if we just start to peel back the onion around emotional intelligence. People come to organizations because of the people they work for. They may come because of the values, but they stay because of the people they work for in that culture or they leave because of the people they work for in that culture.

AI: Yeah, and as you say, relationships are such a central part of being in the church. Community is such a core part of the Christian experience, and emotional intelligence is important for people to have great relationships with each other, to be a reflection of Christ to the world. What's a recent example of a core initiative involving emotional intelligence and competency, and how has it helped your people get to work together and experience that Christian community even more?

Chris: A good example of that is the way we're rolling out development right now. We tried to make it very simple and say, "What are four things we all need to be aware of and work on every day as we come together to work here?" We have four categories, and you'll see they divide into what I talked about: performance and behavior. On the behavior side it's *learn* and *love*. On the performance side it's *labor* and *lead*. So we look at learning, loving, laboring, and leading when we sit down and talk about any employee to say, "How are they doing in these areas?"

We've underpinned that with our own set of competencies we've developed. I can say that Chris is strong in loving other people. He's really struggling on labor. Why is that? Is it because he's lazy? No. It's because he's easily distracted and he jumps onto this other thing, and if he doesn't keep his promise in what he said he was going to do, it's going to be problematic.

So we're getting the language out there with this competency, but on that "learn and love" side, the behavioral side, it's allowing us deep down into "Who am I, how do I operate, and how am I perceived by other people versus how do I *want* to be perceived by other people?" In that comes something that's fairly hard, and that is speaking the truth in love, which is sometimes very hard to do in an organization where you obviously don't want to hurt anyone.

AI: Yeah, I love that. Four *Ls*: *learn* and *love*, *labor* and *lead*. That's fantastic.

Chris: I would add one thing to that. For the tools, we're not trying to reinvent this. Everyone here has now been through the Myers-Briggs, and they're currently going through the Enneagram. So you have one thing that talks to your nature and one thing that talks to your nurture, and those get good results we can springboard from, I think.

Al: I've heard a lot of churches use the Myers-Briggs, and that's well known for a long time. The Enneagram is kind of picking up steam. In fact, I was interviewing the president of InterVarsity Press. He said the Enneagram book they published last year was the largest selling book in their history of InterVarsity Press, so that's becoming a great tool for self-knowledge.

Well, Chris, this has been pretty exciting so far just to listen to the stories you have, the way you've spoken in and created culture builders, how you've focused on specific things that have come out of the survey, and how you've addressed compensation. (I'm going to have one more question about that.) How you've implemented job evaluation. You've taken data. You've created levels. You've put some structure in place to make sure it's fair and equitable.

I give you guys a lot of credit, because I remember being there, and your executive pastor Jack Hoey talked about the way you look at compensation from a percentage of overall expenditure and the number of people you've had and how truthful and transparent the church has been about that conversation, so that's been great. I'd love for you to share one of your favorite before and after stories about how your culture changed and improved for the better, especially how the story can speak to churches regardless of size.

Chris: What I would talk about is another point that came out in the survey, and that was the lack of clarity and direction, where people said, "We know you love us, but where are we going? It feels like we have some false starts." This is where it was exciting to have the different people from that executive group come out. We did a brainstorming session, hung Post-its all over the wall, coming up with ideas about "How do we make this place better based on what we've heard?"

A couple of our leaders from that team really jumped into this and said, "I want to lead this. I want to do this." They helped roll out metrics and performance management. Performance management kind of came from HR, and we introduced those concepts of what it might look like going forward, but these are the leaders who ran with it and made it Seacoast, if you will, and have made it work.

That provided clarity on where we were going and what was most important to focus on, and by doing that, coming back to those same important metrics and some of that important data, this was one of the biggest changes for the better between the first- and second-year surveys. People noticed immediately.

Al: As you said earlier, people were looking for, “What’s the direction? Where are we going?” As I recall, your senior leadership team was crystal clear about the direction of where you were going, but it didn’t translate down to the rest of the staff. This really helped, didn’t it?

Chris: It did. I think they were clear, but what changed here is over the course of 30 years, this went from a very small, tightly knit organization where, if you think about it, not just leadership but leadership and team members could get together often, sit down and have lunch. Now we’re over 300 employees, so it’s just not possible to do that, so you have to start thinking systemically as you grow or it’s kind of like the horse and rider that take off and turn around and realize they weren’t hitched to the wagon and a bunch of people were left behind.

Al: 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.

You’ll receive a comprehensive 40-page report, development guide, and coaching session that will help you reinvigorate and transform your leadership for good. Start today by calling 206-230-8111 or visit us at bcwinstitute.org. The Best Christian Workplaces 360 Leadership Assessment. It’s your first important step to transforming your leadership effectiveness.

Al: Now back to today’s special guest.

Chris, I bet you have another story you’d like to tell about how building a healthy culture caused your people, your staff to really flourish.

Chris: Well, Seacoast is a high grace culture. That’s part of the DNA here and something I personally value very much and hope never changes. This type of environment, though, often means conflict is not welcome in any form. It’s very hard. It was a big step for our leadership team to ask for the feedback in the form of this survey.

We talked a good deal about that first year being the year that the employees were basically sticking their toes in the water. They wanted to understand, “If I do this, if I’m honest, if I say what I’m really thinking, is it safe or is something going to bite my toe off?” It was very important that leaders understand that and understand, as Josh worked with them later, to take time, as you said, to reflect and to internalize, to mourn, to shout, to jump, to laugh, whatever, and then let’s understand where we go with what we’ve heard, because our goal is to see ourselves as God sees us.

He has given us these 280-plus people to give us viewpoints. I think the reaction of the leadership team set the tone for the level of honesty in the second year. We got more honesty, and I think we got more in year three. People are expecting now to be asked and to see something happen based on what they've asked about.

Al: You have been clear and your leadership has been very responsive to the feedback, which encourages the staff. We often are asked, "How many years do we need to do this survey?" I'll say, "Well, your staff will begin to anticipate the opportunity to participate in the survey each year, because they know leadership is interested. It's a way for them to gather the data in a confidential way and act on it." Yeah, that's a great story. In all of what you've shared with us, Chris, how has Seacoast's culture transformation shaped and modeled you personally, even professionally, as a leader at Seacoast Church?

Chris: Well, I've always considered myself to be fairly self-aware. When I do competency scores on myself, that's something my leaders and I have usually agreed I do fairly well on, but being in Seacoast and being in kingdom work has been so rewarding because it's not only about realizing I've uncovered something about myself but that God planted it there and through these different ways he has just been sitting back, delighting, waiting for me to find it.

I kind of had a word, if you will, for the second year I was here, and it was *listen*. I had to slow down and say, "God, why do you have me here?" Yeah, we can run out and fix every problem and make everything perfect, but that's not the real point of why we're all here. So I've been doing a lot of growing myself. I'm currently reading a great book called *Leadership Mosaic* by Daniel Montgomery, and it sums up some of the greatest things that I'm learning and have learned.

Montgomery talks about helping take someone else from the current state they're in to a future state. That's the heart of leadership: change management. But leaders have to remember that they and the person they're leading are both changing because the Holy Spirit is present in the transformation. I knew most of those things before, but I never thought about the fact of how *I'm* going to change when I help someone move from point *A* to point *B*.

He further reminds us that all creativity and innovation starts with God and it takes conviction and direction to see the future and lead people into it. So that's the fun we're having now. We increased the leadership team. It's no longer an ENFP leadership team. We've added several people to it who think differently, so one letter... That *P* has changed to a *J*. That'll tell you a little bit. The DNA is changing there, and that's what we're going for, conviction and direction.

Al: That's great. At the Best Christian Workplaces, we believe a healthy culture is a true and worthy end in itself. We also believe a healthy and flourishing culture leads to organizational growth and even

greater ministry impact. How do you see this impacting Seacoast? How have Seacoast's culture improvements influenced your organizational impact and outcomes?

Chris: Well, I think when you want to get to proof, looking at engagement... Engagement can be harder to measure, so you measure that again through a survey. The interim proof is in the metrics. When we talk metrics we're not talking profits or just numbers. The metrics we're here to focus on are human lives. They are human souls, and they start with people who are finding God and growing their faith, discovering their purpose, and making a difference in the kingdom and the world.

We're able to look at performance metrics and understand, for example, what teams are growing. Where do we have people who are coming to church and not coming back? Where are people coming to church but never moving forward, let's say, into a small group? Leadership is an art and a science, and we've needed to invest some more on the science side. We're doing well on the art side. Now we're doing better on the science side so that it can keep up with an incredible heart Seacoast has always had.

We have a senior-level pastor who oversees all of our campus pastors. His name is Sam Lesky. It has been his clarity of focus and direction these past three years that has really made this successful. Yeah, we have celebrations, but then we go right back to "What did we say we would do? We're going to visit again next week, next month." I think that has been game-changing.

Al: Well, Chris, this has really been a great joy talking with you. Those last couple of points, how you were able to gain clarity after you discovered there wasn't great clarity at Seacoast in terms of metrics and how performance management helped in that process... I loved hearing how rewarding kingdom work has been for you personally. Given all you've experienced in the ongoing transformation and greater health of your culture, give us one final thought you'd like to leave with our listeners, with ministry leaders and leaders who own Christian companies.

Chris: If I could boil it down to one thing, Al, I would say to look for solutions and not echoes when you surround yourself with other leaders or actually grow your team and to just think about what that means. What would have happened if David didn't have Nathan? What would happen if we didn't have somebody to push back a little bit?

None of us will ever have the clear view God has, but look for that person, look for that solution, and be careful surrounding with echoes, because if you really want to ensure you don't get good feedback, just react badly one good time to the feedback you do get.

Al: That's great advice. Chris Taylor, director of human resources at Seacoast Church in Charleston, South Carolina, thank you for sharing your wisdom, insights, and stories, and thank you for extending your ministry to the leaders who are listening and benefiting from all you've shared with us today.

I want to thank you, our listeners, for joining us on the Flourishing Culture Podcast and for investing this time in your workplace culture today. If there is a significant insight, story, or action step you've enjoyed in these past few minutes, please share it with others so they might benefit as well, and please review the show wherever you listen to podcasts.

This program is copyrighted by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. All rights reserved. Our writer is Mark Cutshall, our social media assistant is Solape Osoba, and 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 the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, helping Christian organizations set the standard as the best, most effective places to work in the world.