



Road to Flourishing

By Al Lopus • InterVarsity Press 2022

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The Summary

Preface

My passion in life is to see the workplace culture of every Christian-led organization flourish in the sight of a watching world. My hope is this book will help you flourish as a leader and guide you to create a flourishing workplace culture.

This is a book for leaders of every kind of Christian-run organization, and even Christian leaders in secular organizations can benefit greatly from these principles. You'll hear hard-earned lessons and penetrating insights from leaders in many sectors. The meat of these chapters comes directly from our research into over a thousand workplaces to uncover what engages employees in their work.

If every Christian-led organization were to gain a flourishing workplace culture, then there would be no limit to what they could do. The whole world would see the face of Christ in his people's love for one another.

Before you take another step, however, I want to thank you for exploring the road to flourishing in your organization. I have a dream of seeing Christian-led organizations set the standard as the best, most effective workplaces in the world. If we want to cooperate with God in drawing the world to himself, we have nothing better to offer the world than flourishing Christian workplaces. They stand as a witness that life in Christ is truly a flourishing one! They are the best evidence that Jesus really did come so that people could have life to the fullest (John 10:10)—even in their work.

1. From Toxic to Flourishing: The Eight Keys to a Transformed Culture

During my forty-plus years in culture and human resources consulting, I've become convinced that any workplace can change. I've never seen a flourishing workplace that couldn't sag into mediocrity. And I've never seen a dysfunctional workplace that couldn't flourish.

The more an organizational culture is flourishing, then, the more energy, diligence, and joy your employees bring to what they do. They're more honest, more trusting, and more unified with one another, which sparks extraordinary cooperation and creativity. They become single-mindedly committed to the organization's mission because they believe that their organization cares about them. They believe that they can be productive for things that matter through their organization, and that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. They go the extra mile and choose to put their discretionary effort into what they do. They look forward to coming to work every day because of the vitality they find there. A team full of employees like this can't help but produce at a level of effectiveness that far exceeds the output of a mediocre culture.

Unsurprisingly, if a flourishing culture engages workers, a culture that isn't flourishing disengages them. There's a wide range of suboptimal cultures, from modestly healthy to downright toxic, and as an organization slides down the scale, the consequences become more and more apparent. People become dissatisfied with the jobs; they merely do what they need to do to get by. Innovation disappears. Interpersonal conflicts sprout and escalate. Some people begin actively undermining leaders.

The health of an organization's culture is important at all times. Nevertheless, it is especially important for the times we're living in. The passing of the generations isn't the only change. Prognosticators are speculating

about the shape of the world after the Covid-19 pandemic. We expect many who were propelled into working from home—the acceleration of a preexisting trend—aren't coming back. Even aside from the aftermath of the pandemic, the crisis itself freshly exposed how important it is that leaders be resilient in the face of volatile change, which the workplace is not insulated from.

Grasping the keys to workplace performance and sustainability allows organizations to thrive as conditions evolve. It isn't about plugging in the same strategy that always worked before. It's about understanding the deep truths that shape every new workplace strategy and succeeds in emerging circumstances. No matter how circumstances change, if these key elements are nurtured, protected, and improved, workers engage in their work and their workplace with verve and creativity. A workforce like this can find a way to overcome any challenge.

The measure of organizational culture is the engagement of its employees. *Employee engagement* is a way of saying that team members are motivated to bring their fullest contribution, their unique giftedness and creativity, to their role in the organization for the sake of its success. And they do—they feel empowered by their leaders and inspired by their workplace to make a voluntary, personal investment.

The great tipping point in our understanding of employee engagement came when we collected enough data from workplaces to identify objectively the key elements of a flourishing workplace culture. These eight keys are represented by the acronym FLOURISH.

2. Fantastic Teams

In too many organizations, clusters of workers called *teams* aren't really teams. They're only loosely connected groups of individuals focusing on their own tasks. *Fantastic teams*, on the other hand, are cohesive and aligned, working together toward a single, clear, com-

mon purpose. Fantastic teams exemplify a spirit of partnership and collaboration—not *me* but *we*—to achieve shared goals both within and across departments. They accomplish more than a group of individuals, even talented ones, can do on their own.

The momentum generated by fantastic teams helps drive a flourishing workplace culture and grow employee engagement and well-being. Working on a fantastic team can even be a life-changing experience, as it was for me.

Just about every leader wants fantastic teams in their organization, and just about every employee wants to work in one, but they often can't explain exactly what they're looking for.

In fantastic teams, team members communicate well with each other. They overcome obstacles, solve problems, and get things done. They share credit for success, they love being together, and they bring their whole selves to work because their whole selves are welcome. Fantastic teams are inclusive and diverse, they work through challenges with each other by facing and resolving conflict, and they trust each other. They love to come to work because they know they're loved at work.

Fantastic teams make for an interesting key to begin our journey because they appear to be influenced by almost all other keys. Therefore, if your organization lacks teamwork, going at the problem head-on is probably the wrong move. Don't start by trying to form fantastic teams. Instead, improve the following keys of your organization's culture, and you'll eventually find fantastic teams beginning to emerge as the fruit of that effort. Fantastic teams require inspirational leadership, healthy communication, sustainable strategy, life-giving work, outstanding talent, and uplifting growth.

As fantastic teams begin to emerge in the organization, leaders have to go beyond fostering teamwork within teams to facilitating teamwork between, and cooperation between, whole departments. In a workplace with

a flourishing culture the whole organization works together for maximum effectiveness.

Fantastic teams celebrate and rely on the irreducible uniqueness of each team member while drawing them together in unity. If you've ever been part of a fantastic team, as I have, you know the blessing of God in your life. It feels like a taste of eternal life. Work feels like play. No experience does more to engage a person fully and draw out their best.

3. Life-Giving Work

Life-giving work is work that is full of meaning, significance, and purpose. When employees can utilize their skills and spiritual gifts in what they do, and when they know their effort makes a difference, they love coming to work, and they're devoted to it.

Life-giving work is the most important key in the FLOURISH model. Across organizations as a whole (notwithstanding slight variations among industry sectors), of any single factor, life-giving work has the largest influence on workplace culture. Life-giving work makes such a big impact that it can stabilize and preserve an organization even when everything else goes wrong. If people's work gives them life, it's a buoy to your organization no matter what else is going wrong. When work doesn't give them life, it weighs the organization down no matter what else is going right. Life-giving work sometimes scores high in an unhealthy organization, but it *never* scores low in a healthy organization.

There are several qualities that make work life-giving, but one is far and away the most important: life-giving work *matters*. A person doing life-giving work knows that what they do is important. It makes a difference. They know that something good is happening that wouldn't be happening if they stopped doing it. It's work they can't walk away from.

Life-giving work is always tied to a clear, compelling organizational mission, but even more importantly, it always wraps around the employee's mission.

All work that genuinely helps people is being performed by God through the workers. Therefore, all work is holy because God is in it. There is no divide between sacred and secular because all work matters to God.

For millions of people of all religious backgrounds and no religion at all, the word *vocation* is virtually synonymous with *occupation* or *career*. Yet the root of the word *occupation* has to do with where you find yourself (like occupying a house), and *career* has to do with where you're going (like being carried along). *Vocation*, however, like the word *vocal*, has to do with the voice that calls you. Luther and many other Christian thinkers realized that all Christians are called; we have all be summoned by God to serve him and serve others every day in the ordinary activities we do with extraordinary love.

As a leader you have the vocation of opening people's ears to hear God calling them in their daily work. You have the calling to show them their calling in their work and guide their work to their calling. When people know how deeply that their work is tied to God, their souls drink in the life of the living God in all the work they do. It becomes work they can't walk away from.

4. Outstanding Talent

I define outstanding talent as highly qualified people with the necessary calling, character, competence, chemistry, and contribution to achieve the organization's mission. When an organization is blessed with outstanding talent, their high performance sustains the organization, meets its goals, and makes a marked impact on its mission.

Importantly, in addition to the contribution that high performers directly make to the mission, their presence also fosters an environment that calls out the best from

their coworkers. Employees feel privileged to work with the outstanding team members they see all around them, who inspire them to become the best they can be. They become highly engaged in their work because of the healthy pride they feel working side by side with topflight contributors. This way, outstanding talent drives a flourishing workplace culture and also supports another key element, fantastic teams.

Unfortunately, Christian leaders often hire their friends without going through a disciplined process of recruiting, hiring, and onboarding. I believe that many Christian organizations experience high turnover as a result.

Recruiting talent. Before you bring on outstanding talent, do your best to ensure that you're recruiting for a job that a qualified candidate would want to take in an organization they would want to work for. Every candidate you would be proud to add to your team needs two things: a mission that's great and money that's good enough. The greatest asset you have (or lack), then, is a clear and compelling mission.

Hiring talent. Having a well-structured, consistent hiring process also pays off in the search for talent. It starts with crafting a role description that clearly and accurately defines the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that are essential to succeed in the position. A strong hiring process continues with useful interviews that draw out what the candidate is really like. Get other eyes on the candidate early in the process and continuing throughout.

There is a paradox, a healthy tension here that leaders must be aware of. It is extremely important to hire someone aligned with your organization's mission and values, but it is equally important not to hire someone who sees, thinks, feels, talks, and acts like you. Misalignment can cause organizational disaster, but so does groupthink. If the ditch on one side of the road is hiring a strong performer who isn't committed to the organization's DNA, the ditch on the other side is attempting to hire yourself.

Onboarding talent. It's not enough to find outstanding talent; you also have to glue them to your organization so they don't leave. This starts with onboarding, the process of helping a new person fit into their new team and become an effective contributor. Instead of a bare-minimum routine, develop a six- to twelve-month onboarding timetable to optimize the integration of a new hire into the organization.

It's not enough to get great talent. The second major aspect of getting outstanding talent in flourishing workplace culture is keeping the talent you have. To hold on to your most valuable asset—your people, especially your best performers—there are three areas to pay attention to: retention in general, rewarding high performers, and promoting them.

5. Uplifting Growth

Uplifting growth is the improvement of individuals, groups, and the whole organization to meet the challenges of a changing world. When employees learn new things, their elevated ability enables the organization to maintain and improve its effectiveness. But the organization also improves because employees are more engaged in what they do. (Troy Meachum: *“I've never met an individual who is growing professionally, spiritually, and financially who is unhappy. It doesn't happen.”*)

If your people aren't growing, your company isn't growing. Employees themselves believe that their professional growth and skill development are critical. Employees' desire for growth is as acute in Christian ministry settings as it is in other organizations, but they are less likely to receive it.

On the job: Stretching assignments. The very best environment for an employee to experience uplifting growth is a growing organization with a pressing need for leaders to step up and take on greater responsibility. When leaders take a moment to think about how they learned to do what they do, they almost always find that

it came in situations where they were in over their heads. The irony is that many leaders try very hard to keep their subordinates from those very situations.

Near the job: Feedback and modeling. The second ingredient for uplifting growth comes from the input an employee receives when they take a break from their work with someone who can give them a fresh perspective on it. Employees get this mostly by receiving digestible, applicable feedback from others, especially their supervisor, and also by watching the examples of others and drawing conclusions from what is modeled for them. One highly useful and efficient modeling practice is to take people with you. Bring them into meetings and on the way back to the office discuss what you were thinking and why you said what you said.

Off the job: Structured learning. The final ingredient of uplifting growth is the first thing most people think of when they think about development: structured learning. I'm referring to planned courses, training, and education. Off-the-job training is not the foundation of development, but it makes a valuable contribution to employee growth and well-being.

As with many of the keys to employee engagement, uplifting growth begins with the leader's example. The most crucial character attribute for modeling uplifting growth is humility. It takes humility to realize that who you are now isn't fit to lead your organization five years from now and that you need to take steps now to be ready for the future.

6. Rewarding Compensation

Improving a culture *without* compensating well will fail. Improving a culture *by means of* compensating well will also fail. Only improving a culture *along with* compensating well succeeds. If multiple factors are inhibiting your employees from becoming highly engaged in their work, addressing compensation is not the place to start because throwing money at them won't help.

Compensation probably isn't the reason your best employees stay, but it may well be the reason they leave. If your strategy relies on having great people to execute it, this should concern you. At the very least it should raise the specter of turnover cost. The cost of replacing an employee ranges from 20 to 213 percent of their annual salary, depending on the position. By comparison, adequately compensating your employees is a bargain.

If there is only one thing you take from this chapter, let this be it: compensation isn't about money. It's about respect and fairness. (Of course, there's some exaggeration here to make a point—compensation involves money.) And if a worker struggles to pay their bills, the money matters even more. But it's the respect (or disrespect) and fairness (or unfairness) that compensation *represents*.

Compensation is a language; every paycheck you cut and agreement you seal with any employee sends a message to every employee. So, what are you saying? Respect for workers is why we call this key element *rewarding* compensation. Rewarding compensation tells the employee, "Your work is valuable to this organization; *you* are valuable to this organization. We value your presence and your contribution."

Over the years of working with Christian organizations, I've noticed that many ministry leaders have a blind spot when it comes to compensation. These leaders are unable to recognize or accept the consequences of chronically underpaying their staff. To be specific, leaders neglect compensation in the name of the mission.

When there are budgetary decisions to make, these leaders prioritize investing money in expanding reach in the name of mission over undergirding or boosting compensation for employees.

Compensation cannot lift an unhealthy culture, but it can sink a healthy one. Inadequate compensation drives away outstanding talent and disengages employees, resulting in a severe loss of productivity that

cripples the mission. By contrast, when rewarding compensation accompanies life-giving work, it buoys morale, enriches well-being, undergirds engagement, and nurtures a flourishing workplace culture that yields extraordinary mission accomplishment.

7. Inspirational Leadership

Inspirational leadership is one of the most critical keys to flourishing workplace culture. By calling this kind of leadership "inspirational," I certainly mean that the leaders inspire those they lead to greater, more creative performance. Inspirational leaders breathe in divine power and wisdom and breath out transformative influences on their organization and its people.

Inspirational leadership is not just one key among many; it is the key that turns the other keys. When the other keys are missing, it is certain that inspirational leadership is missing too. Conversely, where inspirational leadership is present, the other keys to flourishing will always appear in time. For instance, inspirational leaders practice the key of healthy communication and make it an organizational norm. They also attach outstanding talent (another key) because the best people want to work for the best leaders.

Inspirational leadership stimulates great effectiveness because it establishes great trust, first between the leader and those led and then among all the people in the organization.

Character: *The foundation of leadership.* I was startled to discover that in general, employees in Christian workplaces have less trust in their leaders than employees elsewhere. Yet, taken as a whole, I have found that leaders of Christian organizations have stronger character than leaders in other organizations do. It seems Christian employees compare their leaders to the standard of Christ, and do not always accept that leaders are imperfect human beings.

Inspirational leadership never begins by lowering standards but by striving to meet them. Employee surveys closely associate integrity, honesty, and transparency in leaders with a flourishing workplace and employees want to know that their leaders genuinely care about their well-being as people. Inspirational leaders put the interests of Christ and the people he has called the organization to serve first, employees second, and themselves last.

Competence: The bond of trust. When an organization's leadership lacks sufficient competence, it is unable to manage the consequences of its success and growth. Disorganization breeds frustration, and frustration breeds toxicity in the culture, which keeps the organization from growing further.

The good news for all leaders is that inspirational leadership is not some magic that some leaders are blessed with and others aren't. With dedication and direction, any leader can become inspirational.

8. Sustainable Strategy

Sustainable strategy is a powerful key to flourishing workplace culture. Strategy and culture are often spoken of as separate things, and plenty of conventional wisdom sets one above the other—which is which depends on the business proverb you're listening to. Culture is the bundle of habits and patterns an organization and its members function by. A sustainable strategy is the deliberate, effective approach an organization takes to serve its constituents. In other words, a sustainable strategy isn't just declared; it's done. It's more than a dictum issued from senior leadership; it's the practice of the whole organization. If culture is "how we do things around here," sustainable strategy means that how we do things is effective in accomplishing our mission.

In organizations that excel in sustainable strategy, leaders describe variations on a cyclical, five-phase process. This process helps them arrive at a sound

strategy not once but over and over again through changing times.

1. Investigate reality. The first phase of developing a sustainable strategy is to see what's going on outside the windows of your organization, to discover the opportunities waiting to be seized, the needs waiting to be met, and what customers, clients, or constituents are truly inclined to do.

2. Inquire of God. It pains me to see Christian leaders get caught in a bad either-or choice: either inquire of God, hear his voice, and obey his will by faith, *or* craft a strategic plan. For Nehemiah, praying and planning went hand in hand.

3. Invent a plan. The most important principle of planning a sustainable strategy is to have one—only one. The right strategy is the one that everyone agrees on. Unity is the key. Involve everybody. Look long to plan short. Set measurable goals.

4. Implement strategies. Once a strategy is crafted, the priorities defined in it have to shape decisions and practices throughout the organization.

5. Inspect results. Sustainable strategy is written on recyclable paper, not etched in granite. It isn't static; it shifts and adapts to changing realities. A strategy is sustainable if it is repeatedly renewed. That requires the results of the strategy over the last season to be inspected to see if it bore fruit.

A sustainable strategy—well-planned, well-executed, and well-reviewed—gives employees confidence that their work makes a difference and that leaders are walking their talk. That motivates them to work the strategy with even greater devotion and enthusiasm, which makes it even more of a success. It's a virtuous spiral where employees, the organization, the people it serves, and God's work in the world all win.

9. Healthy Communication

Healthy communication is the last key of the FLOURISH model, but it certainly isn't the last—it has a substantial effect on employee engagement and well-being. Communication is the exchange of information between individuals for a purpose.

The key element of healthy communication focuses on vertical communication between leaders and employees. The heart of healthy communication is that leaders seek, welcome, integrate, and act on employees' views on decisions that affect them. And related to this, leaders clearly communicate decisions back to employees.

Healthy communication is critical to a flourishing workplace because it establishes and continually strengthens a bond of trust. Healthy communication is crucial to establish the trustworthiness of the organization and its leaders. And healthy communication earns employee's trust, which isn't given readily at first but can be accumulated by leader's open communication and consistent action.

When it comes to workplace culture, healthy communication isn't mainly about one-way discourse from a platform. First and foremost, it's about two-way communication that begins with *listening* to employees, not *talking* to them.

When employees say that communication is bad, they're saying they want to be understood and taken seriously. Above all, they want to be involved—they want to know that they're somewhere inside the circle of decision-making. They don't want to dominate; they just want to be listened to.

There is one simple guideline that covers most of the territory about when, where, and how to listen to employees: involve people in the decisions that affect them. This substantially boosts employee's engagement. And it helps the bottom line by producing a strategy that's simply more effective because of their input.

Without intentional leadership, teams don't evidence diversity, innovation, and accountability. A leader's first step is simply to place the act of listening, the heart of healthy communication. Listening to people creates diversity in itself because it means different voices are coming to the table. It creates innovation because you have different perspectives from all around the globe. Plus, it creates accountability. And it goes back to the control question: do you seek accountability to control everything, or do you see accountability as a team effort, where everybody wants to contribute?

A leader's responsibility to listen well and communicate widely and clearly can be summed up quite simply: "Treat others how you want to be treated yourself." It's hard to improve on Jesus.

10. Journey Inward, Journey Forward: Your First Steps on the Road to Flourishing

A bottom-line message of this book (and my lifelong belief) is that workplace culture determines employee engagement and well-being, and employee engagement and well-being determine organizational success.

By now you may be convinced too. But you may also realize that the road to flourishing isn't just the flavor of the month, and improving your culture doesn't happen by "ready, fire, aim." You may realize you need more information, better understanding, and deeper insight than you have now to do it right.

The only way a leader can really know the condition of their flocks, as Proverbs 27:23 says, is to ask people questions in a way that they will give useful, honest answers. Part of that has to do with asking in an environment where people feel safe answering. The other part is asking relevant questions.

Out of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute's experience with hundreds of organizations, we've distilled the road to flourishing to a simple process with proven

results. The three stages of this journey are *discover*, *build*, and *grow*. In fact, those who take the results of an employee engagement survey and formulate and execute an action plan enjoy, on average, a 7 percent revenue increase and 17 percent growth in ministry reach just one year later.

Discover: The first stage of our journey, then, is to discover the reality of your workplace culture. You can begin right now with our 16-question “Pulse Survey” and discuss the answers with your top leadership team.

Build: The second stage is to build a plan to increase the health of the culture, and that requires the development of a workplace growth action plan.

Grow: The final stage of the road to flourishing is to grow your workplace health and influence by implementing the action plan with effective follow-up. Organizations that continually nurture their workplace culture are those that eventually flourish. This takes time, expertise, and intentionality.

Time after time I’ve seen that the issue of workplace culture, which is so broad and encompasses so many people in an organization, eventually traces its way back to the most intimate space in the soul of a single leader—namely, that person’s relationship with Christ.

To remind you of what your relationship with Christ is, I could read Ephesians to you, but the words might flow over you without grooving a channel because you’ve heard them so many times before.

What I have found, though, is that when I confess to Jesus both my identity in him and the incompleteness and shakiness of my faith, something happens. Gradually I warm to the truth that I am loved by the one who matters the most, the one standing with me and dwelling in me, the one who can handle whatever feedback I may receive even if I cannot, so I can handle it in him.

That security in Christ and his love positions me to know both myself and my organization. He makes me safe to know, and he motivates me to find out. I move from fearing whatever displeasure people might express to seeking it out so I can tend and heal them as a good shepherd does.

Whatever the conditions of your organization, it really can flourish to the glory of God. There really is hope!

Whatever your situation, however intractable your problems may seem, whatever it is you’ve tried before that hasn’t worked yet, I assure you that your workplace can flourish too. Checked-out workers can engage again or for the first time. Ministry influence can extend. Revenue can rise. And most importantly, a watching world can look at your ministry, school, church, or business and say, “I want what they have. See how they work together. See how they love one another!” As Jesus prayed for in John 17, the world can know that God is real and that Jesus is his Son when they see his glory over your organization, on the road to flourishing.