

# BECOMING THE BEST CHRISTIAN WORKPLACE WE CAN BE

Suppose your principal or administrator gave you a sheet of paper with randomly scattered words, and these instructions: *Circle the words that reflect your own experience in this school / college / university.* The options are as follows:

school management, Patrick Whitaker says that the “work we do, and the way we do it, is significantly affected by our experience. When we have been treated in ways which make us feel good about who we are and what we have done, then our commitment is likely to have risen, along with our energy and enthusiasm.”<sup>1</sup>

ranking was based on employee evaluations of their workplaces.

Fifteen statements by those interviewed indicate what employees thought was important in a Christian organization. These 15 statements deserve our attention and reflection. They can be divided into four major categories (adapted to the educational environment):

CONFLICT	ACCEPTED	IGNORED	ENCOURAGED
SUPPORTED	MISUNDERSTOOD	OPPRESSED	
FRUSTRATED	PRIZED	ANGER	ABUSED
CAJOLED	TRUSTED	EMPOWERED	INVOLVED
RESENTMENT	EXCLUDED	GUILT	FUN
LISTENED TO	EXCITEMENT	VALUED	CRITICIZED
HUMILIATED	REPRIMANDED	EMBARRASSED	
ACCUSED	REJECTED	TEAM	

## 1. A High Level of Trust Is Maintained

The number one value among those employed in Christian organizations was a **high level of trust between the administration/principal and teachers**. This appears to be the foundation on which other elements of work satisfaction depend. Research shows that trust develops when teachers perceive that the administration is honest, skilled, and

How would you respond? What words or concepts best reflect your experience in the organization where you are now employed? Is your school the best Christian workplace it can possibly be? Or would the result indicate that there is significant room for improvement?

In addressing the issue of

The June 2005 *Christian Management Report* magazine<sup>2</sup> featured a series of articles and reports outlining the best Christian workplaces in the United States. The top 40 Christian organizations were listed and analyzed.<sup>3</sup> Their

caring.<sup>4</sup>

Another element that generates a high level of trust is the perception that **administrators are behaving with fairness and integrity**. This can be quite a challenging task, especially for “mission-based” organizations that employ a mixture of local and expatriate workers who have

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obvious differences in lifestyle and remuneration.

The next element in the area of high trust is the perception of teachers/faculty that **the organization conducts its activities openly and honestly**. This also can be a challenge in an organization where the structure lends itself to closed committee decisions and where those in senior positions have the power (or take the power) to impose their personal agendas.<sup>5</sup> In multi-layered organization where most decisions are made by committees (which can be dominated by strong personalities), there may be little accountability. With committee rule, no individual takes the responsibility, and there is often little follow-up or certainty of implementation.

Finally, a high degree of trust is maintained when **administrators demonstrate compassion for people at all levels**. Compassion implies that administrators understand and are empathetic about the issues their faculty/staff are struggling with, and are aware of what their employees think and feel.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, this climate is possible only in an organization that fosters open and honest communication without the threat of repercussion or recrimination.

*Christian Management Report* adds that **effective management** seems to be a significant element in building a foundation for trust. Elements of effective management are **accountability, teamwork, and an effective strategy for serving the students**.

As we have seen so far, some organizations are structured to discourage accountability. "Committee-based" organizations tend to be less "team-oriented"—perhaps because the multitude of committees provides an illusion of teamwork, while in reality, teams are either non-existent or function in spite of the established organizational culture.<sup>7</sup>

Now a word on "serving the students." It can be argued that in or-

ganizations where there is little trust and no accountability or teamwork, the top-level managers will inevitably lose sight of the institution's mission (pur-

to hold them accountable. Accountability means not only correcting deficiencies, but also seeking regular feedback. It includes acknowledgement and

have a system in place to consistently evaluate and recognize their employees. As a result, those who are not performing well do not get help and continue to perform poorly. And those who work hard and often go "the second mile" feel unappreciated and eventually become burned out and disillusioned.

Empowered people are **encouraged to experiment and be innovative**. It's true that by allowing people flexibility and freedom to perform in accordance with their gifts and personalities, ad-

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pose) because they are caught up in constant "crisis management" rather than forward planning and ensuring "student satisfaction."

### 2. Teachers Are Empowered

The second area of concern is empowerment. For Christians, this should be no surprise. When Christ came to this planet, He gave up His power and in turn empowered His followers to do "greater works."<sup>8</sup> So why do some Christian organizations struggle so much with putting this concept into practice?

The surveyed individuals highly valued **management that seeks and acts on the suggestions of faculty/staff**. This is not surprising; a person whose opinion is valued is likely to express more loyalty to the organization. There is a feeling that he or she can make a difference and contribute to the greater good.

On the other hand, when the administration does not seek input and/or ignores suggestions made, faculty and staff will gradually cease making suggestions, thus depriving the organization of valuable resources.

### Recognizing Excellence

Another significant area is the perception that **"I'm satisfied with the recognition I receive for doing a good job."** Unfortunately, some Christian organizations seem to leave recognition for the last days when Jesus says "well done, thou good and faithful servant." Obviously, this should not be the case. While waiting for the Second Coming, administrators will need to regularly demonstrate to teachers that they value their input and are prepared

recognition of teachers' contributions.

Few Christian organizations/schools

#### Suggested Questionnaire for 360 Degree Accountability

Accountability is essential for any organization that desires to be a place where teachers feel appreciated, esteemed, and valued. Accountability is a two-way process. Secure and strong administration will want to know how their teachers feel about their current job and their leaders. Here is a suggested questionnaire that can assist in this process:<sup>9</sup>

Scoring: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree (avoid circling 3 if at all possible)

In my organization, there is a high level of trust between the administration and teachers.	1	2	3	4	5
Our leaders behave with fairness and integrity.	1	2	3	4	5
My school conducts its activities openly and honestly.	1	2	3	4	5
Our leaders demonstrate compassion for people at all levels.	1	2	3	4	5
Administration seeks and acts on the suggestions of teachers.	1	2	3	4	5
I'm satisfied with the recognition I receive for doing a good job.	1	2	3	4	5
We're encouraged to experiment and be innovative.	1	2	3	4	5
Administration explains the reasons behind major decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
My organization is well managed.	1	2	3	4	5
I'd rate my school as a superior place to work.	1	2	3	4	5
I'd recommend my organization to others as a good place to work.	1	2	3	4	5
People are held accountable for doing what they say they'll do.	1	2	3	4	5
I'm very satisfied with our level of Christian fellowship and spirituality.	1	2	3	4	5
Our leaders exhibit the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, kindness, etc.	1	2	3	4	5
Given the opportunity, I would decline changing my workplace.	1	2	3	4	5

ministrators take the risk of things being done “differently”—but this is a risk worth taking. No progress was ever made by always “following the manual.”

Encouraging people to take risks also means not penalizing them if innovation or experimentation doesn't work out. A culture that encourages innovation will quickly “cut its losses” and seek new ideas. This will create cutting-edge schools whose employees “think outside of the box” and are ready for the challenges of the future.

Finally, when **management explains the reason behind major decisions**, teachers feel empowered. There is a sense that faculty/staff can be trusted with information, which makes the employees feel that they are part of the “bigger picture.” Many “mysteries” evaporate once there is a free flow of

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information and all parties know what is going on. There is no need for gossip and rumors because the game is “fair and square.” This principle is particularly important when tough decisions need to be made that affect teachers or employment, or could significantly alter the future of the organization.

### 3. Good Management Practices Are Valued

In this section of the survey, partici-

pants expressed four values that can be outlined as follows:

- a. My organization is well managed.
- b. I'd rate my organization as a superior place to work.
- c. I'd recommend my organization to others as a good place to work.
- d. People are held accountable for doing what they say they will do.

What stands out here is that employees have a sense of pride in their organization and are happy to be part of it and recommend it to others. Given a choice of similar organizations, they would choose to stay in their current place of employment. They know their work is valued, and they believe the organization is serving the students and community well.

Clearly, the first two sections (Trust and Empowerment) are fundamental in creating an environment where teach-



ers feel appreciated and where they approve of leadership/management practices as well as the trajectory of the organization. This translates into a strong sense of loyalty toward the workplace and its leadership.

The last element present in institutions where employees feel satisfied and motivated is that of spirituality.

#### 4. Spiritual Community Is Nurtured

An analysis of Christian organizations should reveal elements of spirituality that make them different and unique from secular schools and businesses. In Christian organizations/schools where teachers feel satisfied, there is a clear, strong spiritual emphasis. Those surveyed said: **“I am very satisfied with our level of Christian fellowship and spirituality.”** How to measure this fellowship and spirituality and what specifically contributes to this feeling of satisfaction is not the issue. Various cultures and faith traditions embrace different expressions of spirituality. What is important is that biblical values and a sense of “faith community” are apparent throughout the organization.

The final point can be considered a “wake-up call” for all Christian leaders and administrators. Satisfied employees said: **“Our leaders exhibit the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, kindness, etc.”** In other words, the spiritual community is initiated and sustained through the practical example of those in leadership. This is not achieved through competitions over the number of “spiritual meetings” or even by whether people pray before and after each committee meeting or class period. Spirituality is the effective integration of faith into the workplace. It is demonstrated by daily attitudes and actions.

In conclusion, Christian organizations that set the standard as the best workplaces are those whose leaders generate a high degree of trust, empower people, and integrate spirituality in all aspects of their activities in a competent and caring way. Is this an impossible ideal to reach? Perhaps not, if we are to believe the employees of

the top 40 Christian organizations surveyed.

Adventist educators need to ask themselves: Is our school the best Christian workplace it can be? If not, there are opportunities for God’s grace to be manifested and for Christ’s model of leadership to be followed more closely. Making this change will not be easy, but the rewards are priceless: satisfied teachers and students, as well as a school that is putting into practice its mission statement and glorifying God’s name. If we ask in faith, God will help us to achieve these goals.<sup>10</sup> ✍



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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Patrick Whitaker, *Managing Schools* (Oxford: Butterworth/Heinemann, 1998), p. 130. The suggested “survey” is based on the chapter “Work and Well-being.”
2. *Christian Management Report*, published by Christian Management Association, San Clemente, California, June 2005.
3. Organizations are categorized into sizes as well as the type of organization, i.e., Parachurch and Missions, Christian Schools, Higher Education, Media, Products and Services. For example, Zondervan is listed as the best Christian place to work at in the category of Media with more than over 150 employees. Also, Bethel University is

the winner of the Higher Education section with more than 300 employees.

4. A book dedicated to this topic is *Trust Me—Developing a Leadership Style People Will Follow* by Wayne A. Hastings and Ronald Potter (Colorado Springs, Colo.: WaterBrook Press, 2004). Another valuable resource is *Leadership Directions* by Andrew Seidel (Dallas: Center for Christian Leadership, Dallas Theological Seminary, n.d.).

5. The “pushing of personal agenda” is not included in this discussion to mean malicious behavior, but rather in the context of “trying to make the best decision for the organization.” However, while the motive may be sound, unilateral decision-making results in diminished trust among employees.

6. I believe that if the administrators take the time to listen to their teachers’ thoughts and feelings, many creative solutions can be found. This also enables the leadership to act in a focused way while still being attentive to the hurts and hopes of employees. Often issues may be only perceptions, but for those who hold these perceptions, reality is almost irrelevant. For that reason, it is vital to keep channels of communications open to deal with perceptions and build on reality.

7. The teams that function in spite of the established organizational culture may be appreciated, but more likely will be perceived as a threat by the administrators.

8. John 5:20.

9. This questionnaire is based on the *Christian Management Report* (June 2005), pages 5-12, article entitled “The Role Managers Play in Creating the Best Christian Workplaces” by Kevin Scheid, who is a partner in the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, Mercer Island, Washington.

10. “We constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith” (2 Thessalonians 1:11, NIV).

