

A HEALTHY STAFF CULTURE IS A KEY DRIVER FOR HIGH IMPACT CHURCHES

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Article Summary

This report includes research of responses from 1,900 staff members in 14 large churches who participated in the Best Christian Workplaces survey. The data was collected between 2005 to 2007. Church staff members completed the 56 question survey from a web-enabled survey platform. The broad-based staff opinion survey is similar to those used with in large corporations with a section designed by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute to gauge the Christian dimension.

“But churches are different!” That’s the response of some pastors when someone suggests an idea from another type of organization as a solution to a human resource issue at their church. The reality is that there has been little research about employee practices in churches to identify why they would be different. This article highlights potentially breakthrough results of staff research in some of the largest and fastest growing US churches. My desire is to go beyond reporting data, and to provide actionable ideas that can be used to improve the health of your staff culture.

The majority of churches today have a very small staff, such as one pastor and one administrative assistant. When a church passes 500 or so in attendance, and organizational complexity develops, which intensifies for churches of several thousand. The staffing model and culture in a large church present a number of challenges for those who work and serve there.

This research identifies the key drivers that impact staff commitment and engagement in larger churches. One distinctive is the higher expectations for the behavior of coworkers, particularly leaders. The expectation is that because you are working in a church, the spiritual fruit is more abundant, and relationships with co-workers are joyous and harmonious. Yes, like heaven on earth. However, it isn’t long before these expectations and reality begin to clash. Without intentional effort to mold a healthy culture, poor internal staff cultures grow and expand, potentially impacting the church’s witness in the community.

According to research from The Best Christian Workplaces Institute (BCWI) where I serve as president, Christian organizations with a committed staff who are engaged in the growth and life of the organization are typically healthier, thus leading to effective ministry outcomes and growth.

It should be no surprise then that intentionally focusing on building a healthy staff culture is one of the ways church leadership is changing. As Darin Yates, executive pastor observes, “Taking care of our staff is a principle that rapidly growing **Crossroads Community Church** (<http://www.crossroads.net>) in Cincinnati, OH embraces wholeheartedly.” The BCWI survey results of large churches demonstrate that Crossroads is not alone.

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RESEARCH

This report includes research of responses from 1,900 staff members in 14 large churches who participated in the Best Christian Workplaces survey. The data was collected between 2005 to 2007. Church staff members completed the 56 question survey from a web-enabled survey platform. The broad-based staff opinion survey is similar to those used with in large corporations with a section designed by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute to gauge the Christian dimension. The survey is scored on a 5 point scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Each individual response is strictly confidential. The sample size from each of the participating churches is statistically significant within a 95% confidence level.

A sample of church participants who have given us permission to mention their names include:

- **Willow Creek Community Church** (<http://www.willowcreek.org>)
South Barrington, IL
- **Wooddale Church** (<http://www.wooddale.org>) Eden Prairie, MN
- **Church of the Resurrection** (<http://www.cor.org>), Leawood, KS
- **Crossroads Community Church** (<http://www.crossroads.net>) Cincinnati, OH
- **Southland Christian Church** (<http://www.southlandchristian.org>) Lexington, KY

To conduct the statistical analysis, BCWI worked with the Industrial / Organizational Psychology Doctoral program at Seattle Pacific University.

OVERALL RESULTS

How do the staff survey results in large churches compare with other Christian organizations? Do they have less satisfied or committed staff? No. The average score for all individuals in this database of large churches is 3.9 (4.0 is agree) on a scale of 5 (strongly agree). This score compares with nearly 90 Christian organizations’ overall score of 3.9. The overall scores are exactly the same.

STAFF COMMITMENT AT CHURCH—WHAT MATTERS AND WHAT DOESN’T

In order to identify the items that matter most to staff commitment in churches, BCWI conducted an analysis that regressed each item against our variable named *staff commitment*. Our definition of staff commitment is the level at which an employee is motivated to help the whole church succeed. We are calculating commitment by grouping the following three survey items in the BCWI survey:

1. *All in all, I am satisfied with my job*
2. *I would recommend my church to others as a good place to work*
3. *I would prefer to remain with my organization even if a comparable job at a higher pay level were available in another organization*

What Matters Most: The issues that matter most to church staff are the character and competence of church leadership. Certainly the primary issue is the spiritual heart of leaders and the way it is manifested in their behavior. Leadership behavior reflecting fairness, integrity, authenticity and transparency top the list. It is also a key expectation that leaders demonstrate spiritual maturity by exhibiting fruit of the Holy Spirit in their lives while keeping a focus on putting Christ first in daily decision-making. Staff are expecting that their leaders are the “real deal” particularly in our culture.

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**And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly
with your God.**

Micah 6:8

“Trust is the one thing that changes everything” says Stephen M. R. Covey in his recent book *The Speed of Trust*. He states that trust is built or lost on both issues of character and competence. Our research highlights the trust issue at the core of the staff—leadership relationships and the health of the staff culture. The top items in the list below are all subsets of trust. Staff are weary of pastors who preach one thing and then do another in their interaction with their staff.

Related to trust is the competence of leadership in management effectiveness to make sure the church is not only well managed but also improving each year.

The items that matter most (have the highest correlation) to staff commitment include:

1. *My church’s leaders behave with fairness and integrity*
2. *There is a high level of trust at my church between senior management and employees*
3. *My church is well managed*
4. *Over the past year, my church has improved for the better*
5. *The management of my church keeps a focus on putting Christ first in daily decision-making*
6. *My church’s leaders exhibit the fruit of the Holy Spirit (love, joy, peace, kindness, etc.)*
7. *My church’s leaders conduct their activities openly and honestly*

What Matters Least: The issues that matter least to staff commitment are the benefits and regular performance review issues.

The items that matter least or those with the lowest correlation to staff commitment include (beginning with the lowest):

1. *I am satisfied with my retirement plan (pension, 403(b) 401(k), RRSP, etc.)*
2. *I am satisfied with my medical or health plan*
3. *I am satisfied with my paid time off (vacation, sick leave)*
4. *In the last 6 months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress*
5. *My co-workers are highly committed to excellence in their work*
6. *In my work we work effectively as a team*
7. *My supervisor helps me solve work-related problems*

These items that matter most and least show the relationship between each of the items and staff commitment. The next step in the analysis is to identify what items can predict or drive staff commitment in churches.

WHAT STAFF ARE LOOKING FOR—KEY FACTORS INFLUENCING STAFF COMMITMENT

In churches, what are the factors that influence staff commitment? To answer this question, BCWI conducted comprehensive statistical analysis on the items that comprise the survey. The data naturally falls into groups of highly correlated, coherent underlying dimensions. As a result, the factor analysis of church staff responses reveals that the 56 questions form five major factors. Each of the factors has been named to reflect the major pattern. They include (1) a high impact church, (2) rewarding job, (3) great leadership, (4) compensation and (5) excellent co-workers as reflected in the following table.

Church Staff Commitment Model
Table 1



WHAT STAFF ARE LOOKING FOR

What do talented staff look for when deciding which church to join? Table 2 shows which items are considered critical to large numbers of staff and which ones are not. The bold items in Table 2 are the ones that have a strong causal relationship with the overall level of commitment reported.

What Staff Are Looking For In Large Churches

Table 2. Items critical in the decision to stay with a church

1. HIGH IMPACT CHURCH

- **High Impact Ministry**
- ✓ **I recommend my friends worship here**
- ✓ **We have a winning strategy**
 - We reflect Christ to the world
 - Clear consensus on church goals
 - Value loyal relationships with congregants
 - High quality services
- **Well Managed**
- ✓ **Last year, we improved**
- ✓ **Retains highly qualified staff**
- ✓ **Church is well managed**
 - Good fellowship
 - Job security
 - Staff are accountable
 - Maintain life balance
 - Good cross dept teamwork
 - Innovation is encouraged
 - Church has met its goals
 - Promotes the most qualified
 - Recruit highly qualified staff
- **Staff Involvement**
- ✓ **Diversity of backgrounds, styles and ideas are valued**
 - I feel free to voice my opinion
 - Staff suggestions are sought
 - Staff are involved in decisions
 - Suggestions are acted on

2. REWARDING JOB

- **Good Fit**
- ✓ **I have fun at work**
- ✓ **I feel my job is important**
- ✓ **I use my spiritual gifts**
 - Recognition for a good job
 - Decision making authority
 - Use my skills

3. GREAT LEADERSHIP

- ✓ **Integrity and fairness**
- ✓ **High trust with staff**
 - Exhibit Fruit of the Spirit
 - Open and honest
 - Put Christ first in decisions
 - Demonstrate compassion
 - Explain reasons behind decisions

4. FAIR COMPENSATION

- ✓ **Fair pay**
 - Medical plan
 - Paid time off
 - Rewards top performers
 - Retirement plan

5. EXCELLENT CO-WORKERS

- Good conflict resolution
- We work effectively as a team
- Commitment to excellence

✓ = a strong causal relationship with overall level of commitment

I. High Impact Church

Beyond the work that they are doing, staff want to be part of a great church and making an impact for the kingdom. They want to like the culture and values, feel they are part of a well managed organization and be directly involved in planning and executing the ministry plan. Of the five factors in this model, working for a high impact church has the most influence. Specifically, this overall factor has three sub components.

- **High Impact Ministry.** *Committed staff believe in their heart that their church is making an important impact in the lives of those who attend. Two items in our research underscore this conclusion. A key item impacting the commitment level of staff is would they invite a friend to participate in church activities? It's that personal. The other driver for the committed staff person is the confidence they have in the ministry strategy for the church.*
- **Well Managed.** *Working in a church that is well managed is important to staff. Unlike market place jobs, the motivation for more pay and promotions are not key drivers in church staff according to the survey results. The important issue for church staff is the belief they are making a difference for God. "It all comes back to vision," claims Yates at Crossroads. "Our staff believes in what God is doing at their church and in Cincinnati. They are sold out to do whatever they can to serve God even if it means that have to make adjustments in their lives."*
When they are blocked from accomplishing their goals because of poor processes and time wasting activities, staff are frustrated. The three key drivers for a well managed, high impact church is the sense that the church has improved for the better over the past year, that the church is able to retain their highly qualified staff and that things run smoothly from an administrative viewpoint. Yes management competence is critical.
- **Staff Involvement.** *The third element of the high impact church factor is a culture where staff are involved in decisions that impact their work. Of primary importance is the choice of leadership to value and respect the unique backgrounds, personal styles and unique ideas of each staff member. This factor indicates the church culture promotes an environment where active staff participation is expected and rewarded.*

Implicit in creating a high impact church is effective communication patterns established by leadership.

2. Rewarding Job

In our surveys, staff tell us they want fun, exciting, challenging jobs that match their spiritual gifts and a purpose that makes them feel their job is important. Again, to create a healthy church culture, leaders must be intentional. At Crossroads, for example, they reinforce this by hiring only people who have a healthy sense of humor. Darin Yates says, "It's a lot more fun to work with others who bring good humor to work."

- **Good Fit.** Three items highlight our definition of good fit. That's when a person has the opportunity to use their spiritual gifts, know their work is meaningful by giving them a sense their job is important and as a result, they are having fun at work.

Bruce McNiel, executive pastor at Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, MN says they regularly talk about fit when interviewing potential employees. Wooddale holds a philosophy on hiring that relates to gifts and talents and particularly the issue of fit. "Our leadership is constantly evaluating staff based on their fit for the tasks and nature of the ministry that their roles encompass", says McNiel. "In fact we use a Christian industrial psychologist to help us with fit."

Dan Entwistle, managing executive director for Programs and Ministries at the Church of the Resurrection received abysmal results when they first participated in the Best Christian Workplace survey in 2004. He realized that most people in key management positions were not hired because they were good at management but because they were talented in music ministry, youth ministry, etc... They embarked on a project to find out what tools were needed for those individuals to become more effective managers. After implementing a 360 degree review process their survey scores increased dramatically.

- **Opportunities for Growth.** A key part of having opportunities to grow and develop as a person is to have very clear job expectations. Once the job expectations are clear, staff are in a position to identify the resources available to them to help them perform and grow in the job. Church staff look to their supervisors to care about them enough to clearly define their jobs and give them opportunities to learn and grow.

At Wooddale Church, staff move to new areas of ministry that will provide new challenge and growth for the employee and thereby enhancing that particular area of ministry. McNeil says, "We want to help people succeed, grow and enjoy new challenges and opportunities."

3. Great Leadership

This factor relates to the core character of the leader. As we pointed out earlier, the leaders' character highly correlates to staff commitment. Staff perception of Christ-centered leadership, fairness and integrity, openness and honesty about organizational activities are critically important aspects of great leadership. At BCWI, we consider highly favorable scores on this group of questions to reflect strong, positive relationships between an organization and its employees. In addition, these employees perceive that they are working for honest and trustworthy leaders who put Christ first and foremost in their organizational goals and pursuits.

Staff are looking to their leaders to behave with authenticity, transparency and humility. Best-selling author Patrick Lencioni diagnoses that "when there is an absence of trust it stems from a leader's unwillingness to be vulnerable with the group." He continues, "Leaders who are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses make it impossible to build a foundation of trust."¹

4. Compensation

Fair pay is on the list of drivers impacting staff commitment, although not nearly as important as the first three factors. The specific question is: in comparison with people in similar jobs in other Christian organizations, I feel I am paid fairly. This factor is often overlooked in churches, yet is receiving increased attention as professional salary surveys are being made available for the large church market. BCWI's recommendation to large churches is to first develop their own compensation philosophy that highlights the church's compensation principles. Examples include targeted pay levels relative to comparable positions in similar organizations, internal fairness, pay for performance philosophy, and administrative guidelines.

Many churches do not talk about compensation and as a result, a void exists that is generally filled with half-truths or worse.

5. Excellent Co-workers

From the open ended comments in the BCW survey, staff regularly communicate how they appreciate working with other Christians. They particularly appreciate skills in their workplace regarding good conflict resolution often resulting in good teamwork. As Christians in a church setting we are too often unwilling to admit we may have a conflict with a person. After all, we are called to love one another and to be of one spirit. Healthy cultures overcome this fear of conflict and engage in unfiltered and passionate debates on ideas while respecting the individual.

"Five years ago we were conflict avoidant at the Church of the Resurrection," says Dan Entwistle. "Now we engage in healthy conflict and we do so in a way that does not undermine people, but instead promotes growth. Healthy conflict can be used by God to improve our ministry," he explains.

WHAT IS YOUR CHURCH STAFF VALUE PROPOSITION (SVP)?

As churches have changed, so has the way they have recruited staff into ministry positions. Large churches have found they are hiring their best volunteer leaders into ministry roles. Dan Entwistle shares that they tend not to hire people out of the church world; most of them have come from the volunteer ranks. "If you observe someone as a volunteer, you will already know if you can entrust them with greater ministry responsibilities", he says. Ultimately, the talented ministry candidate asks the question, "Why should I work at your church?"

That's what a staff value proposition is for. A holistic sum of everything people experience and receive while they are part of a church—everything from the intrinsic satisfaction of the work to the environment, leadership, colleagues, compensation and more. A strong SVP attracts great people like flowers attract bees (Source: *The War for Talent* by McKinsey Consulting, 2001). It helps the candidates better understand God's calling into ministry.

To create a compelling staff value proposition, a large church must provide the core elements that talented staff look for. Based on the staff survey results the key factors include the five factors listed previously: a high impact church, a rewarding job, great leadership, fair compensation and excellent co-workers.

WHAT SENIOR LEADERS ARE LOOKING FOR

Is the model any different for senior leaders in large churches? Yes, is the short answer. In the BCW survey we ask participants to self select job level. One of the job levels is described as “senior pastor and department managers.” Conducting a similar statistical analysis as above, the outcomes for senior leaders in large churches include: high impact, rewarding job, and compensation.

While over half of the importance factors for senior leaders are also important for the rest of the staff, two new factors emerge. Those items are related to recognition and rewards for top performers. This is a particularly important finding for committees given responsibility for evaluating and rewarding the senior leadership staff in large churches. As search committees recruit for the top jobs in the church we recommend they consider the needs for recognition and rewards for doing a good job as part of the value proposition.

What Senior Leaders Are Looking for in Large Churches

High Impact Church

- ✓ I recommend my friends worship here
- ✓ Last year, we improved for the better
- ✓ Diversity of backgrounds, styles and ideas are valued

Rewarding Job

- ✓ I have fun at work
- ✓ I receive recognition for doing a good job

Compensation

- ✓ Top performers are effectively rewarded
- ✓ I am paid fairly

GREAT LEADERS + GREAT CULTURE = GREAT CHURCH

As churches become larger, they become more complex. We believe the result of the research on the Best Christian Workplaces survey taken by large churches provides a framework for developing healthy cultures in churches of every size. Applying marketplace principles that do not incorporate a Christian worldview are not fully appropriate for application in a church environment. Yet today, resources and research are becoming available so large churches can make fact-based, informed decisions about the allocation of time and resources for the largest investment in the annual budget—their staff. Leaders of large churches now have tools available so they can intentionally focus on building a healthy staff culture. As a result, positive, healthy staff cultures become an important ingredient to the church’s witness to the community, being salt and light to the world.



AL LOPUS

Al Lopus is the president and cofounder of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, founded in 2002. The Institute provides research-based measurement tools and strategic advisory services with a single vision: *to help Christian organizations set the standard as the best, most effective workplaces in the world.* At BCWI, Al and his team have conducted the broadest-known employee opinion survey of Christian workers. The comprehensive survey includes 400 Christian organizations representing over 65,000 employees. <http://www.bcwinstitute.com/>



WARREN BIRD

Leadership Network welcomes your response. The primary writer is Al Lopus. The editorial advisor was **Warren Bird**, Director of Research and Intellectual Capital Support for Leadership Network. Contact them via Bonnie.Randle@leadnet.org

About Leadership Network

Leadership Network fosters church innovation and growth through strategies, programs, tools and resources consistent with our far-reaching mission: to identify, connect and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact. Website: <http://www.leadnet.org>

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Leadership Network’s mission is to identify, connect and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact.

** Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.*

ENDNOTES

¹ Lencioni, Patrick, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, (Jossey-Bass, March 2002).