

Labour of Love

What's Good About the 10



Communication, Empowerment and Trust are Common to Top 10

Lisa Howden decided to give it one last try. Disillusioned by Christian organizations she had worked for in the past, Howden started her secretarial job at the headquarters of the Free Methodist Church in Canada with jaded eyes wide open. If this Christian workplace didn't work out, she'd shake the dust off her heels and move into a job that kept faith firmly out of the "nine to five."

It's been seven years now and Howden did move—from clerical duties to head of communications for the entire

denomination.

"Within one year they realized my skills could be better used because I'm a graphic designer. They looked at me and said, 'Where can she bloom?'"

This gardening approach to employees, recognizing the gifts of individuals and making it a priority to grow them stronger—planting them where they can bloom—reflects the environment of each organization in the Top 10 List of the Best Christian Places to Work in Canada survey.

Best Christian Workplaces?

“We grow a lot of our own leaders,” says John McAuley, executive director of Muskoka Woods Sports Resort, a Top 10 finisher.

There are a lot of green thumbs in the Top 10, with missions ranging from sports and the gospel at a deluxe camp in Ontario’s Muskoka region to caring for the disabled in British Columbia. More than 1,000 employees of 28 Christian organizations across Canada took the detailed survey this summer and gave their employers anonymous feedback on a wide range of workplace issues. (See sidebars for complete Top 10 list and survey details.)

The workplaces that ranked in the Top 10 believe in empowering their employees and engaging them in a clear mission for which they have both the passion and appropriate skills. Employees are engaged in regular communication with the rest of their teams—there are no lone rangers or micro-managers here. They feel they are living out their calling in a healthy environment, while still providing adequately, if not always abundantly, for their families.

EMPLOYEES ARE PEOPLE TOO

“I expected to see the finalists doing well in the high value placed on each employee as a person,” reports John Pellowe, chief executive officer of the Canadian Council of Christian Charities, one of the survey’s sponsors. “This value was a theme in the employee responses from all the finalists. I’m happy to see our theology in our practices, because as Christians we see every individual as God’s image-bearer.”

Image-bearers sometimes wash pots in the kitchens of downtown Toronto. That’s where Peter Duraismi got his start at the Scott Mission. He is now director of ministry—and still stresses the vital role of kitchen work in a Top 10 ministry that feeds and serves the homeless of Toronto. “I enjoyed washing dishes. But putting the gifting and the calling of people together is a wonderful thing.”

ME AND MY MISSION

The gifts and callings of the employees of the Top 10 are routinely identified, nurtured and then guided towards the fulfilling of the mission of their organizations—a mission that is succinct, precise and frequently communicated. Al Lopus is co-founder of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, which administered the survey in Canada. He says “deeply engaging” employees with their organization’s mission is essential to both the success of the employee—and the success of the mission.

David Tigchelaar, executive director of the Bible League of Canada, agrees. “We encourage every staff person to own the mission—we share in it.” The League also reports back to employees on the mission’s progress frequently, even daily, with e-mails reporting on how many Bibles and other Christian resources have been distributed overseas. “When you hear and see the stories coming back it motivates you,” says employee Noral Woodburn. “There is nothing more joyful than hearing and seeing

What is the Best Christian Workplace Survey?

It’s not a contest. It’s not even a competition. The Best Christian Places to Work in Canada, sponsored by the Canadian Council of Christian Charities (CCCC) with the Bridgeway Foundation, is best viewed as an opportunity and an investment, organizers explain. “When I heard about the American one, I thought immediately, ‘We need this in Canada,’” says John Pellowe of CCCC.

The survey is an opportunity for employees to let loose on what they really think about their workplace through a confidential, highly detailed report administered by the Best Christian Workplace Institute (BCWI), a Christian human resources research and consulting firm based in the state of Washington. And it’s an opportunity for their bosses to listen.

This summer more than 1,000 Canadian employees of 28 Christian organizations filled in the blanks on questions ranging from their personal satisfaction at work to how conflict is resolved in their workplace. They were asked if they felt cared for by their managers and how they really felt about their benefits packages, training and much more. Organizations were also permitted to add questions tailor-made to their own workplace. (Participating organizations were required to have at least 10 full-time employees and have an explicitly Christian mission.)

The survey results were tabulated and ranked on the scores from the employee surveys and organizational profiles. A panel of independent judges chose the finalists. David Amy, a specialist in charity law; Susan Healey, a senior consultant in the field of employee benefits; and Adrian Miedema, an employment lawyer, were the three Canadian judges for this year’s surveys.

The Top 10 list was announced in Winnipeg in September at the CCCC’s annual conference. Every organization that participated received a report detailing its strengths and weaknesses.

The 2005 Best Christian Places to Work in Canada survey is now open for entries. For more information visit www.cccc.org. ■

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what God is doing with His Scriptures in the world.”

The progress of Christian Direction, whose mission is to have a Christian impact in Quebec, is clearly not as easily measured.

“But never minimize how important it is to have a crystal clear vision,” says executive director Glenn Smith. “It’s got to be clear. It’s got to be realistic. I’ve learned in Quebec that too much vision can be as bad as too little.” Christian Direction’s ministries are tailor made to fit the gifts of their team and include creating art on the street and studying Scripture in high-rises. There are measurement indicators in place for every outreach. Staff members interact regularly to discuss what is happening in society and what role Christian Direction, and individual staff members, can play in it.

It is that emphasis on individual participation in the mission that also distinguishes the Top 10. “There is a call, by name, from God, on each person into their role,” explains David Smith, the Scott Mission’s executive director. “It is a calling of equal importance as a calling equal to that of Martin Luther, Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela.”

The success of the organization hinges on this individual participation in the mission, says Bruce Clemenger, president of the Top 10’s Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. “We can do well only if all our different areas are being done with excellence. No one can do it alone.”

I TRUST YOU

Another consistent theme of the Top 10 organizations is recognition by the leaders that, indeed, they can’t do it

by themselves. That takes trust on the part of a leader to let other people do what they have been gifted and called—hired, actually—to do.

Through two prior American surveys—and now one Canadian—a high degree of trust shows up in the organizations that rank near the top, says Al Lopus, Best Christian Workplaces director. “As you’d hope in Christian organizations it’s about relationships built on trust. There’s an environment, of trust between senior management and their employees.”

When Barry Slauenwhite, president of Top 10’s Compassion Canada, makes one of his frequent trips overseas, he doesn’t fret about what’s happening back at the London, Ont. headquarters. “I’m always impressed by the calibre of the people I work with and what they do. There’s a high level of trust and people respond very, very well,” says Slauenwhite.

How is an environment of trust created in these organizations? At Calgary’s Centre Street Church, senior pastor Henry Schorr consciously cultivates it. “It is developing a culture in which there’s a sense that ‘I can be heard in this situation.’” Each fall he teaches on the 12 values that staff abide by, such as being grateful (one director of a Top 10 calls gratitude the lost spiritual discipline), being Christ-centred and being humble. Schorr believes that the health of the church the team leads (5,000 members) depends very much on the health of the team.

Gregg Bryce, SIM Canada’s executive director, believes trust is built in that Top 10 mission by “allowing people to

The 2004 Top 10 Best Christian Workplaces in Canada

Bethesda Christian Association: Bethesda’s mission is to support people with disabilities and their families with the attitude and motivation of the Good Samaritan. Bethesda supports 240 families and individuals with disabilities in British Columbia. www.bethesdabc.com

The Bible League of Canada: The League provides Scripture and training worldwide that bring persons prepared by the Holy Spirit into the fellowship of Christ and His Church. www.thebibleleague.ca

Centre Street Church: A member of the Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada, this large church in Calgary says it is also a network of small churches. “This means we have hundreds of small groups (which we call small churches) of individuals meeting together on a regular basis for the purpose of encouraging one another in our Christian walk.” www.centrestreetchurch.ab.ca

Christian Direction: Their mission is to pursue the spiritual transformation by Jesus Christ of all of life in the cities of Quebec and the francophone world. www.direction.ca

Compassion Canada: In response to the Great Commission, Compassion Canada exists as an advocate for children to release them from their spiritual, economic, social and

physical poverty and enable them to become responsible and fulfilled Christian adults. www.compassion.ca

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada: The EFC gathers Christians together to dialogue, to equip and to partner for greater effectiveness in ministry and public witness. www.evangelicafellowship.ca

The Free Methodist Church of Canada: This church exists to “make known to people everywhere God’s call to wholeness through forgiveness and holiness in Jesus Christ, and to invite into membership and equip for ministry all who respond in faith.” www.fmc-canada.org

Muskoka Woods Sports Resort: A Christian, interdenominational, nonprofit sports resort welcoming youth of any race or creed. www.muskokawoods.com

The Scott Mission: A Christian non-denominational agency in downtown Toronto for the poor of the community, seeking to bring physical, spiritual, emotional wholeness to their friends. www.scottmission.com

SIM Canada: SIM is a global community of interdenominational Christians, passionate about reaching people with the love of Jesus Christ, working through the Church. www.sim.org



Clockwise from top left: The staff of Christian Direction, The Bible League of Canada and Bethesda Christian Association



be involved in the process, even how we do our budgets. They can see the books. They have input.” SIM counts on staff reviews as key times to ask staff how management can help them grow. “It shows them we care about them,” says Bryce. Since his move to executive director just over a year ago, Bryce has also introduced a staff code of conduct, a set of values that “we’ve all bought into.”

When staff of an organization all agree to live by a certain covenant of behaviour in their interactions and work habits, trust will grow. People know what to expect and can hold each other accountable.

These things are not easily put out of mind at Compas-

sion Canada’s headquarters. A long hallway cuts through the middle of the building and into the heart of the issue. Plaques that define Compassion’s leadership principles hang on the wall: Cherish Family; Lead with Courage; Strive for Excellence—and the principle that can catapult an organization into a Top 10 list for best Christian workplace: Humbly Listen.

LOUD AND CLEAR

Employees of all the Top 10 believe that management hears their concerns. “Listening,” says Jeff Greenman, director of the Tyndale Centre for Leadership Development in Toronto, “is the essential leadership skill.”

Bert Altena is a listener. He does a lot of hanging out among his many other tasks as executive director of Bethesda, a Top 10 organization serving disabled people in British Columbia. Many of the individuals Bethesda works with live in group homes around the province. Altena spends a good chunk of time visiting the homes, drinking coffee with staff and the special individuals they care for. He may troubleshoot a computer while he’s there, but mostly he’s present to listen. “They can talk to me about their problems.”

Joyce Findlay has worked in the accounting department of SIM Canada for 13 years. Prior to their monthly meetings, staff members are invited to submit items for



the agenda. They're guaranteed to make it. "They want to listen to you," says Findlay.

The feeling is the same at the Free Methodist Church in Canada national office. Twenty-four years in pastoral ministry taught Bishop Elford the art of listening. "I'm quite interruptible. When people want to talk, they come in. We communicate."

TALKING TO THE BIG BOSS

Staff of the Top 10 clearly feel they can talk to their managers, but the freedom to talk to God while at work—out loud and not hiding in a broom closet—is another highly valued characteristic of working in a healthy Christian environment.

The Christian culture counts for a lot of employee satisfaction. Hanging on the wall in the library of the Markham, Ont. office of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada is a large white board. One day there is a sketch of a chicken, because someone is off to help her sister on a farm and is quaking in her workboots. There's a cartoon of overflowing garbage cans because the Toronto garbage strike is messing up an employee's life. The board is frequently used for prayer requests, and frequent prayer is one of the things employee Gina Waugh loves about working there. "If we have problems during the day at work, we pray about it." Joyce Findlay of SIM Canada calls their morning prayer "a beautiful meeting spot" for the whole team.

The spiritual life involves more than prayer, of course, and the spiritual care offered to the employees of the Top 10 is varied. Christian Direction's executive director Glenn Smith is an avid reader and frequently passes books on spiritual themes to the team. Muskoka Woods's John McAuley takes his staff on regular retreats and conferences. "Because we're in the business of life-changing experiences [camp], we want to give our staff a life-changing experience. We challenge them biblically." Married staff are required to do marriage enrichment every three years. McAuley relishes stretching his staff to try new things and develop their skills, but his first priority is clear: "Spiritually is our first stretch. We bring in the best Christian teachers; we have the best books; we take the spiritual growth of our staff very seriously."



WORTH THEIR WAGES

The employers at the Top 10 know that just as their staff need a firm spiritual foundation

From top: Compassion Canada, Centre Street Church, Muskoka Woods Sports Resort and The Free Methodist Church of Canada

to stand on, they also usually need a house to sleep in, kids need braces and that minivan broke down again. Striving for fair remuneration and adequate benefits is an important characteristic of each of the Top 10. No one in charge is hesitant to quote 1 Timothy 5:18: “The worker deserves his wages.”

Whether or not they think they are getting every cent they deserve, workers in these organizations seem to believe they are adequately paid, which is not always the case in Christian organizations.

“Pay is something most Christian organizations are afraid to talk about. It causes problems,” says Al Lopus of Best Christian Workplaces Institute. “People join these missions for the purpose of serving, and they’re willing to do it for less money. That’s great. But leaders also need to deal with pay issues. It takes courage.”

The majority of the Top 10 have, in the last two years, engaged an outside human resources agency to determine if they have a pay scale that is fair and equivalent to a non-Christian agency of similar size and scope.

Where there is major discrepancy they say they are committed to making life as comfortable for their employees as they can. “If a Christian organization can pay a comparable wage it has an obligation to do it,” says David Smith of the Scott Mission.

Gina Waugh of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada knows she could probably make more money elsewhere, “but I’d have more headaches as well as more money.”

Many employees are willing to take lesser pay for what they consider to be a higher road. That takes courage too.

SPEAKING OF COURAGE

It also takes courage to give your employees a wide-ranging survey that allows them to comment anonymously on every aspect of their workplace. “We went into this to see what we could learn so we could get better. We weren’t after the award,” says Bishop Elford of the Free Methodist Church of Canada.

Another characteristic typical of the leaders of the Top 10 best Christian places to work in Canada is a nagging feeling that they’re not there yet. “For me, we’ve still got a long way to go,” says Gregg Bryce of SIM. “We want to continue to grow people.”

As directors, CEOs and managers, they say they are in it to learn—and being on the Top 10 list was a bonus. As Barry Slauenwhite of Compassion Canada points out, the top spot of best Christian employers is already taken: “God is the ultimate best employer.” ■

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When You’re Not the Best... Yet

There are no losers,” reassures John Pellowe, chief executive officer of the Canadian Council of Christian Charities (CCCC). But what if your organization is clearly not the best Christian workplace in Canada? Now you have the proof!

The good news, according to Al Lopus, president of the Best Christian Workplace Institute, is that when organizations take part in surveys like this one, leaders can use the confidential results to improve their workplace—once they pick themselves up off the floor.

“Typically organizations that aren’t finalists are shocked,” explains Lopus. “They suspected that maybe they weren’t good, but they are surprised at how ‘non-good’ it really is.”

So, how bad does “non-good” really get?

There are some typical characteristics of organizations that don’t make the Top Ten list. Lopus points to poor communication between leadership and employees as a major issue. “People have to know what’s going on.” Another danger area is too much attention being paid to the mission of the workplace—gazing outward—to the detriment of how that mission is carried out—looking inward.

“Leaders are often so stretched raising money they are not looking at how things are going inside.” This imbalance can actually damage their mission and definitely harms workplace relationships, says Lopus. It’s bad news for managers: employees typically come on board because of the mission of the organization, explains Pellowe of the CCCC, but they abandon ship because of the management.

If leadership does spend that time developing trust and relationship with their team, their organization will become healthier and more productive. They will also know their team and its strengths and weaknesses better, which can help solve another problem typical to Christian organizations: Nice Guy Syndrome. “Too often leaders use compassion instead of wisdom in promoting people. Christian organizations keep poor performers way too long,” says Lopus.

Ouch. But even when a poor performing branch is being chopped off the tree, it should be done with mercy. “Love one another” (even if you’re being axed) should be the theme of the Christian workplace. Too often, says Lopus (and countless ex-employees of Christian organizations everywhere), it is not. “A Christian organization has the code book—the Bible—they just need to follow it.”

Now at least 28 Christian organizations also have the results of the first ever Best Christian Places to Work in Canada survey. With that, suggests Lopus, they can talk to their employees, solve some of the problems and create new, healthy ways of working together. “Dream it, make it and implement it. You have to. Because the workplace gets worse if you survey your employees and then do nothing about it.” ■

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