

The Best Places to Work



How to Create a Healthy, Fruitful Workplace

By
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With the economy still sluggish, ministries are struggling just to maintain their budgets and employees, much less finding ways to grow. Is it any different for those recently named one of the 50 Best Christian Places to Work? The research indicates an unequivocal yes.

The recently completed second annual Best Christian Places to Work project, conducted by Best Christian Workplaces Institute (BCWI), surveyed more than 10,000 people from 107 Christian organizations, representing a wide range of industries and company sizes (a 26 percent increase in participants from the previous year).

A key finding emerging from the survey is the strong correlation between employee satisfaction and an organization's growth. In other words, says BCWI executive director Al Lopus, "Healthy workplaces tend to be fruitful workplaces."

What do the leaders of these workplaces have in common? BCWI has identified four key success factors.

An Environment of Trust

Organizations with a climate of trust cultivate it by practicing openness and honesty, and caring for their employees.

■ **Openness and honesty.** The main vehicle for achieving openness and honesty with employees is good communication.

One common characteristic of the best Christian workplaces is the tendency to "over-communicate."

Management in these organizations realize good communication is a difficult task, requiring focus, effective formal and informal communication channels, and a sincere effort to ensure all employees receive and understand the information.

Good communication not only fosters a culture of openness and honesty, it also empowers employees with information, shows that management trusts them and strengthens teamwork.

Mark Bailey, president of repeat finalist Dallas Theological Seminary, states, "there's a direct correlation between open communication and trust." DTS strives to "tell employees as much as we can tell them and to let them know where we are in our planning. Communication is what breeds the trust," says Bailey.

This is especially important in dealing with pay, rewards and benefits. Even though our data indicate that these are not the primary motivators for Christians, and seem to have little correlation with overall workplace satisfaction, secretive behavior in this area is sure to destroy trust.

This can be a touchy topic, especially if management believes they're falling short and there's nothing they can do about it. Moreover, employees in Christian organizations are sometimes reticent to approach management about pay and benefits

The 50 Best Christian Places to Work in 2004

Products and Services (<i>less than 50 employees</i>) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gospel Music Association 2. DeMoss Group 3. Council for Christian Colleges & Universities 4. Pura Vida Coffee 	Private Schools, K-12 (<i>less than 75 employees</i>) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mariners Christian School 2. Calvary Christian High School 3. Wheaton Academy
Products and Services (<i>more than 50 employees</i>) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cogun 2. EMI CMG (Christian Music Group) 3. Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) 4. Shepherds Ministries 	Churches and Related Organizations <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fellowship Church 2. New Life Church 3. The Christian and Missionary Alliance
Higher Education (<i>more than 300 employees</i>) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Whitworth College 2. Seattle Pacific University 3. Cedarville University 4. Roberts Wesleyan College 	Christian Media <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Howard Publishing Co. 2. InterVarsity Press 3. EMF Broadcasting 4. Daystar Television Network
Higher Education (<i>150 to 300 employees</i>) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dallas Theological Seminary 2. Belhaven College 3. Huntington College 4. The Master's College 5. Westmont College (tie) Simpson College 	Parachurch and Missions (<i>more than 100 employees</i>) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Coalition for Christian Outreach 2. SIM USA 3. Denver Rescue Mission 4. CityTeam Ministries
Higher Education (<i>less than 150 employees</i>) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Phoenix Seminary 2. The Master's Seminary 3. Bethel Seminary San Diego 4. Assemblies of God Theological Seminary 5. Bryan College 	Parachurch and Missions (<i>31 to 100 employees</i>) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Medical Ambassadors International 2. New Mission Systems International 3. The Friends of Israel 4. Pioneers 5. MOPS International
Private Schools, K-12 (<i>more than 75 employees</i>) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Desert Christian Schools 2. SBEC 3. Evangelical Christian School 	Parachurch and Missions (<i>30 or fewer employees</i>) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Apartment Life 2. Team Expansion 3. Peacemaker Ministries (tie) Pioneer Clubs 4. Ravi Zacharias International Ministries

About the survey: The Best Christian Places to Work is a nationwide annual employee survey conducted by Christianity Today and Best Christian Workplaces Institute, to determine, recognize and celebrate Christian organizations which are the best stewards of their human resources.

A high percentage of employees from each participating organization are asked to complete a survey consisting of 50 multiple choice questions, eight demographic questions, up to five questions selected by the organization, and three open-ended questions. In addition, each organization completes a profile that reflects its human resources practices.

Participants were grouped into six different categories, and then again divid-

ed by size. The identities of participating organizations were confidential as the results were passed to an independent panel of judges. The three judges (Olan Hendrix, CEO of the Leadership Resource Group; John Pearson, president/CEO of Christian Management Association; and Kent Humphries, president of Christ@Work) selected the top 50 out of 107 participants.

Early registration for the 2005 survey is now open at www.bcwinstitute.com and a discount is available before June 30. The survey is scheduled to begin in mid-October and run through the end of November 2004. At the end of the survey, each participating organization receives an in-depth report of its survey results.

because it may make them appear too motivated by money.

■ **Caring for employees.** The Best Christian Places to Work show in myriad ways that the concerns and welfare of their employees are important. For example, an organization cares for its employees by selecting supervisors who

care about employees, and by providing the materials and authority to employees to do their job properly.

Most participants in the survey emphasized training and development, investing on average 1.76 percent of their payroll in these areas. The best workplaces to work went one step fur-

ther and actively managed the development of their people by providing regular updates on progress and performance, ensuring ample opportunities to learn and grow, and making it a priority to recognize employees when they do a good job.

Regardless of all the great things an

organization might do for its employees, the ultimate test is whether or not management follows Jesus' command to love one another.

Prayer and worship times are common at these winning workplaces, as employees feel strong bonds with one another and are open to asking for and receiving prayer from their colleagues. As a result of these strong community bonds, employees often go out of their way to support their colleagues, adding to the satisfaction they have with their workplaces.

Taking Time to Manage Well

Top performers in the survey demonstrate a universal truth: that good management requires focus and intentionality—it doesn't just happen. Some common ways in which leaders at these organizations manage well are by *working from a base of high trust, demonstrating fairness and accountability, developing a winning strategy for serving customers/supporters, and building strong teams.*

■ Ensuring a high level of trust.

Trust is the foundation of management, and there's no way to build a record of good management without it. Research indicates that trust and good management are inextricably linked and the first step in building better management is to ensure a high level of trust.

■ Demonstrating fairness and accountability.

Holding people accountable for their commitments and responsibilities isn't often viewed as a key issue when addressing positive leadership in an environment of shared power. However, without accountability, commitment, honesty and fairness are all devalued, good workers are discouraged, and complacency takes over.

Best Christian workplaces tend to take positive action to ensure accountability. A good performance management system with routine progress reports and a culture of recognizing good jobs are essential tools for an accountability system. Even with these tools properly in place, an organization needs a clear plan and philosophy for addressing shortcomings. Generally a simple acknowledgement of a problem and an indication that management cares is sufficient for a more experienced and trained workforce.

■ Serving customers/supporters. Em-

ployees are drawn to work environments where they know the strategies are successful and making an impact. This may be particularly true in Christian organizations, where the mission is often of utmost importance to employees.

The best Christian workplaces take the time to not only craft sound strategies, but they then align their organizations with focus and precision on those strategies.

Stan Dobbs, president of finalist Apartment Life, says, "We have a scorecard that defines success for us. Different elements are tracked, measured and reported, and employees know what those elements are.

"It can be difficult in a Christian organization to measure the impact of spiritual things. But there are many things within our responsibility, such as how intentional we are with building relationships with the lost. Our scorecard translates into specific goals for employees' job functions. To me, over the long haul, this is the key to an organization's effectiveness."

■ **Building strong teams.** A common feeling among employees taking the survey this year was that they had good teamwork within their work group. There seems to be no correlation between the perception of good teamwork in a small work group and perception of good management for the overall organization. Most employees believe they're good team players and their immediate work group functions well together.

However, when those same employees were asked if there was good teamwork between departments, there was a significant difference between the response of the best Christian workplaces and non-finalists. Employees in the top 50 felt strongly that there was good teamwork across departments, whereas non-finalists rated interdepartmental teamwork much lower.

The results indicated that small organizations have good teamwork, but as they grow, the ones that effectively make the transition and incorporate teamwork across departments become the best places to work.

Sharing Organizational Power

Sharing power allows employees freedom and flexibility in their jobs, whether that means the power to make appropriate

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decisions on their own, or the ability to change their work time to suit their lifestyle.

Despite the fact that employees appreciate and desire this flexibility, Christian organizations have remained slow to respond. Christian Management Association president John Pearson says, "For an organization to have a culture of freedom and flexibility, it has to make it a core value, owned first and foremost by the leaders. Then they have to be willing to practice it with those who report to them. But I don't think leaders understand yet how much employees appreciate a flexible work environment."

The best organizations effectively shared responsibility and authority with employees

by acting on suggestions, involving employees in decisions that affect them, explaining the reasons behind major decisions, and nurturing an environment of experimentation and innovation.

■ **Acting on employee suggestions.** Next to trust, seeking employee suggestions and acting on them was the greatest differentiator of workplace satisfaction in this year's survey. The relationship between trust, implementing employee suggestions, and ministry results is very powerful.

However, tapping into the creative talents of employees goes far beyond a suggestion box. The best places to work have created a culture where employees are encouraged to innovate and have the

flexibility and authority to implement new ideas within their area of responsibility without management approval.

■ **Involving employees in decisions affecting them.** Whitworth College recently had a decision to make regarding health insurance options, and it chose to present the options to its employees to get their perspective. As a result, the college designed two different plans to fit different life stages, a solution that might not have been implemented without the employee perspective.

The DeMoss Group went one step further by allowing the employees to develop and recommend their health care plan with no interference from management. The plan was approved as presented.

"Help,

My Organization Is One of the Worst!"

One who has seen both the best and worst in today's workplaces is Al Lopus. His experiences as a human resource consultant for more than 25 years have given him a unique perspective on what makes an organization work well. *Christian Management Report* spoke with him to provide guidance for those who work in Christian organizations that could use improvement.

What's it like to work in an organization that could be considered a "worst Christian place to work?"

People in a "worst place to work" are often immobilized by apathy or paralyzed by fear. Their opinions are not solicited, or worse, they're disregarded. They feel disrespected and intimidated by their leaders, communication is top-down, and they don't feel much compassion from fellow employees. An atmosphere of rudeness and lack of respect pervades the whole organization, creating a sense of despair, because employees feel as though there's very little hope for change.

What would you recommend for someone who is working in this environment? Is it that person's responsibility to change it, and if so, how?

Regardless of how difficult the environment, any individual *can* make a difference and, if there's a problem, he or she needs to try and resolve it. Often, people either pretend conflict doesn't exist or talk behind peoples' backs about it. But according to Matthew 18 we should graciously bring out the issues. Every Christian has a responsibility to create controversy when there is a wrong or an injustice being committed.

Christian workers need to name behaviors that are not

appropriate in their organizations, no matter what the risks. They must also build consensus with other employees, to see if the problem is one that is generally felt throughout the organization.

Perseverance is certainly a desirable Christian quality, but are there ever acceptable and appropriate reasons to abandon an unpleasant workplace?

It's difficult to consider changing jobs if you have linked your work or ministry with your personal vocational calling. But I would ask myself the question, "Could I see myself making a greater contribution to the kingdom of God in another position?" If that answer ever becomes yes, I would explore other options. God wants us to make the most of our abilities so that we make our best contribution to his kingdom, and we have a responsibility to change our situation if necessary.

What ends up happening to employees who remain in that type of workplace environment? What are the long-term effects to the employer?

Some employees in a negative workplace environment learn they can be partially effective despite the quirks of the organization's behavior. But they are not able to make a full contribution, often coasting just to keep their job, and by doing so, their character gradually erodes.

In contrast, employees in a good setting feel blessed to contribute to the ministry in their organization. So they'll do anything to help their workplace succeed. And most importantly, if a person is in a good workplace, he or she will grow spiritually. That's a good litmus test for employees to use.

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There are many tools available to assess the gifts or interests of employees (see article by Rodney Cox on page 13). They're usually useful, but one common factor we've found with the best places to work is management's wisdom, experience and talent to put people in the right job.

Moreover, close attention to *the process of recruiting and hiring, promoting and retention is essential.*

■ **Recruiting and hiring the right people.** Hiring staff is typically a stringent and rigorous process. It sometimes includes 360-degree interviews, where candidates are interviewed by potential bosses, peers and subordinates.

Gospel Music Association is able to garner this same valuable information by selecting employees from interns who have worked there for six months or more. "Other than Gospel Music Association, I have never worked at a company where I felt everyone was in the position in which they most shine," says Daniel White, sponsorship manager at GMA.

Belhaven president Parrott also believes in the value of creating job responsibilities around a person's abilities, rather than around a rigid job description. "We tend to craft jobs around people's gifts and strengths, rather than confining them to traditional job roles. I have one vice president for admissions, PR, athletics, information technology, and financial aid—because those are areas he's good at."

■ **Basing promotions on performance.** Most organizations have some system to evaluate employee performance, provide feedback and promote. These systems work best when the main focus is to help develop the gifts and talents of the employee and when conducted faithfully. The feedback from these evaluations is invaluable for the employees in helping them correct shortcomings, as well as setting goals for future personal and professional growth.

Even with a good performance evaluation system, the wisdom and judgment of the manager is the chief determinant of whether or not the system is effective. As GMA's White shares, "I take my hat off to our leadership for having the discernment to bring out and understand the gifts and talents of everyone in our office."

It's a talent in and of itself to properly

place people in their area of giftedness.

■ **Retaining the right employees.** One common mistake made by many of the participants was not putting enough emphasis on retaining good employees. Although the best places to work scored significantly better at this than the others, even in the best there is a tendency to take employees for granted after they've been around awhile.

Organizations that make an effort to re-recruit their best employees use incentives, such as sabbaticals, increased pay, and increased vacation as a reward for seniority. Re-recruiting employees shows that management cares and wants these employees to stay.

However, the organizations best at retaining employees are also best at everything else in managing their human resources. There is no shortcut to becoming a great place to work, just as there is no shortcut to retaining good employees.

Paying Attention

Qualitative characteristics of the Best Christian Places to Work included top management's involvement in the survey, close attention to the results and willingness to share those results with employees.

Good managers, especially in larger organizations, realize they can't know what's going on with their employees by sitting in their offices. They know the importance of talking to people and listening. They also recognize the importance of a systematic and modern measurement tool, such as an employee satisfaction survey.

The bottom line is that the best places to work have managers who care about their people, who put the time, energy and resources into building trust, managing well, sharing power with employees, and getting the right people in the right positions.

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