



Interview with William F. Baker, co-author, *Organizations for People*

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KENNEALLY: With the world in lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, the offices and classrooms where only weeks ago we would gather and collaborate are now off-limits. Organizations and institutions have vanished from the physical world, and where and how we are able, we have recreated them in the virtual environment.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Digital transformation famously leads to transparency where previously there was obscurity. As we work from home or study online, we see work and studies in a remarkable new light. Our workplace matters hardly at all, but our organization's culture is suddenly paramount.

As the global health crisis grips the planet, William F. Baker sees an opportunity for the right kind of leadership that will keep employees healthy in body and in spirit. Co-author with Michael O'Malley of *Organizations for People*, recently published by Stanford University Press, Baker identifies respect and trust as essential elements of a successful human resources strategy, especially when formal structures and rigid policies carry little weight. Baker directs the Bernard L. Schwartz Center for Media, Public Policy, and Education at Fordham University and is president emeritus of WNET 13, New York's public television station. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Bill Baker.

BAKER: Thank you, Chris. It's a joy to be here.

KENNEALLY: It is a real honor to have you join us, especially at this moment, because you can offer some fascinating insights on organizations at this particular instance of the COVID-19 crisis. And I want to open by asking you, based on the observations you can make from home, where we all are these days, how do you rate the performances of organizations in their response to the COVID-19 crisis?

BAKER: I'd say – well, of course, it all depends on which organizations. Some are like a deer with the headlights in their eyes and just really paralyzed by it. Others have really rallied and stepped up to doing business an entirely different way, and along the way, embracing their customers and their employees by communicating with



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them, by using electronic technologies in new ways, by not totally panicking themselves.

For example, I'm involved with a number of universities. Some of them I'd say aren't doing a good job at all. Others have just really embraced their students, started taking care of business, and they've really done a fine job. So it all depends on a combination of the leader, the culture of the institution, and a lot of good luck. Nobody was ready for this. It's almost impossible to be ready for something of this nature. But if you have a really healthy organization, and you have caring leadership at the top, usually you get through it.

I never forgot, during 9/11, our television station, of course, in New York, the public TV station, along with all the other TV stations in New York, got wiped out, because our transmitters were on top of the World Trade Center. We lost our employees up there, so we had life lost. And I never forgot telling my staff at that moment – I said, you know, this will be our real test. We've always gone on the air and begged for money and said how important we are. Well, this will either prove what we said was correct, that we are important, or we're just a joke. So I said, it's really up to us, and particularly you the employees, to figure out how we can best serve the people of this area and the country.

Well, the station rallied, and it wasn't me at all. It was a lot of the people – somebody from the art department said, you know, we have the biggest phone system in New York that we use for our pledge drive. Why don't we let the Red Cross and the Office of Emergency Management use it? So they all came in and took over, and they were so grateful to have it. One thing after another, we had massive volunteers helping.

So that's what we see now, I think, in a different way, but a similar way – companies reaching out and helping. But some aren't doing such a good job at all, because again, if you're strictly a bottom-liner, and you've kind of only done well by managing your financial statements, that means you're probably not going to do well in a crisis like this.

KENNEALLY: For that kind of positive response to happen, Bill Baker, there needs to be a positive workplace culture. And for your book, you visited 21 organizations and researched their business performances as well as the success they had in creating such cultures. What did you learn? Were there common elements to a positive workplace culture?

BAKER: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. The 21 companies we visited were of all kinds – manufacturing, insurance companies, game companies, consulting companies.



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They were all relatively good-sized, meaning they were \$50 million or larger. Probably the largest of the companies was the clothing manufacturer Patagonia. But they were all private companies, so they had kind of a leadership and a philosophy that was not strictly a bottom-line kind of thing. It was, hey, let's do what's right. And they were also often companies that were successful enough that they could afford to always do the right thing. Now, when you have the entire society paralyzed by this COVID-19 thing, we see some of the companies that only thought of the bottom line probably not doing so well in being able to lead their staff through it.

But to answer your question about what are some of the common things, we came up with a bunch of them. My co-author, who's really the lead author in this project, Dr. Michael O'Malley, who is a full-time industrial psychologist – my PhD is in organizational behavior, but really I've been a media guy for the last 50 years, not really a professional HR-type person – but we came up with about five key things. One is a Chinese word called *mo*, which really means – there's no direct translation for it, but it's really about how you interact with your fellow employee, how people brush up against one another, in a sense.

The second one is another foreign word, *vergönnen*, which is a German word meaning giving praise and complimenting other people, where you have a certain kind of culture that has that.

And then I guess the third probably would be autonomy – allowing people to do their own thing in their own way. That's really the modern way that companies act.

But to me, the most important of all is kindness. Our first book in this series was called *Leading with Kindness*. Kind leadership gets you really a long way. It gets you really a long way. So no matter what – and especially in an environment that up until this COVID-19 crisis, nobody's doing measurements right now of company attitudes, but 36% of the employees of the companies before COVID-19 said their bosses were dysfunctional. That's a pretty big word, dysfunctional. And 75% of the workers before this said that their boss was the most stressful part of their job. And there was another study recently, just before the COVID-19 – in Canada, two of five professionals said that they quit their jobs because of bad bosses. So in this country and in North America in general, there's a lot of trouble with bosses. (laughter) We have some real leadership issues.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. In fact, your book is kind of a call to action for better leadership. You're really saying – I think you demand better leadership from our leaders to create the kind of cultures that you're describing and the atmosphere of



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kindness and respect. How can you help leaders improve their behaviors? Is there a path to success you can line up for us?

BAKER: I'm not sure. I wish I could paint a really wonderful picture. Up until the COVID-19 – so I'm saying right now, we don't know what things are like right now. They probably aren't that good. But up until then, things were getting worse rather than better. Our first book came out in this series 10 years ago, right in 2008, when the bottom fell out of the stock market. And I don't think there was a lot of attention to kindness at that time, even though we were stressing that it was important, because everybody was willing to tolerate almost anything just to hang onto his or her job. And now, who knows? It's probably going – with 20% unemployment right now, it's probably very much the same thing.

So the measurements that we had seen over that whole period, because Dr. O'Malley and I had worked so hard at trying to get kindness into the drinking water, we got it into the drinking water in that so many people talked about it. But if you really looked at the studies, things were getting kind of worse rather than better in American culture, I assume because it was aiming for the bottom line, which we say is aiming too low.

So we don't know, except that I can tell you – except that I can tell you this is something that we have been fighting for for a long time, and the way we in this book did it, this *Organizations for People* book that Stanford University asked us to do, this is not just, oh, this is our feeling. This is our life experience. This is what these 21 companies – this is how they operate. No, no, no, we not only did all that, of course, but we said, how about the research? And being both, particularly Michael, industrial psychologists, PhD industrial psychologists, we went into the research.

And the research showed – we have 40 pages of footnotes of the research alone in this book – 40 pages of research. Basically all of the research shows, all of the experimentation in this field shows that being kind – you can be a failure, in the sense that you can make mistakes. You're not a doormat. Being a kind leader doesn't mean you're a doormat or that everybody loves you, because very often that's not the case. But they do trust you, and they believe you to be authentic, and they say if he says or she says this, they mean it. So all of the research shows that kind leadership does work. It does pay off. And it's really the only way to go for the long haul.

Notice I said long haul, because in the short term, often nasty leadership, killer bosses, all that stuff, that works. There's nothing like fear to motivate people. Fear does motivate people without question. But it motivates them for the short term. It



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does not make it work for the long term. Hence probably the companies that we studied were companies that were really all in it for the long term. They were individual owners of large companies, and they weren't playing the quarterly dividend game.

KENNEALLY: You mentioned fear, Bill. There's a lot of fear right now. We don't need bosses to put fear into our hearts. We have the fear of the global pandemic and the economic consequences it has brought with it. It seems to me, though, that this notion of trust and authenticity – there's no better time than now, at such a moment, to be a leader who can encourage his or her staff to trust him, to follow him, to believe that his decisions are being made out of concern for them.

BAKER: Oh, absolutely. What happened after 2008, when some of these companies were the ones that precipitated the crash of 2007 because of, among other things, bad management and not open management – and there have been enough studies now to show that that was pretty much the case and some of those banks precipitated the problem. Here, the same thing.

KENNEALLY: So it seems to me, Bill Baker, that at this moment, there are a number of senior executives who are critical to the continuation of any organization. So we need the IT, we need the CIO, the CTO to make sure that technology works. We need the CFO to make sure the numbers are still coming out the right way. But you would tell us that we also need at the center of the activity a chief cultural officer. That's how you labeled the human resources role. Why at this moment – at any moment – is having such a person at the center of activity critical?

BAKER: Every company, even though some say we don't have a culture – every company, in fact, does have a culture, and it varies considerably. But somebody who is monitoring what is going on, who can be an ear, because often the CEO – especially if the companies are large, you can't meet with every one of the employees and have your ear totally to the ground.

To say, hey, we're driving this Mercedes over a cliff if we keep doing this, and not be afraid to relay that kind of information up to the leadership. And the leadership can say, we're doing this. It may appear that we're driving the Mercedes over the cliff, but we think we are doing the right thing.

KENNEALLY: William F. Baker, co-author with Michael O'Malley of *Organizations for People*, thank you for joining me on Beyond the Book.

BAKER: Chris, thank you very much. Really enjoyed being with you.



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