The Power of Civility + Community with Christine Porath (Transcript)

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Chris Congdon: Most people don't feel a sense of community at work, which is kind of sad. And that was actually measured before the pandemic. And our guest today has studied data from over 20,000 employees. And when she saw that 65% of people aren't feeling that sense of community, she set out to change that statistic. Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host, Chris Congdon, and I'm with our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

Rebecca Charbauski: Hi Chris.

CC: Hi Rebecca. Will you tell our audience about our guest today?

RC: Today we're talking to Christine Porath. Christine wrote Mastering Community, the Surprising Ways Coming Together moves us from surviving to Thriving, which got our attention. But before that, she wrote Mastering Civility, which also has a lot of interesting ideas in it. She contributes to Harvard Business Review, the New York Times Wall Street Journal. She's worked with organizations like Google, Microsoft, and Ford. And right now she's a visiting professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hills Business School.

CC: And we actually saw her book about community on the bookshelf of Amy Gallo from HBR. That's right. So when we saw that, we knew we wanted to talk to Christine. And when we had a conversation with her, she makes a really compelling argument with data and tells powerful stories about creating community in the workplace. She's connected this concept of creating community to other ideas like engagement, retention, and whether someone actually feels like they're thriving in their job.

RC: It's a really interesting conversation, and we'd like to ask our listeners to share this episode with a friend or a colleague, especially if they want to learn more about this topic.

CC: And we get into her work on civility too, which is a lot more important than a lot of people might think about. And some of the research she's doing now hasn't even made it into a book yet. But we'll hear about it and we probably will be reading about it someday soon. Thanks for joining us on Work Better Today. Christine.

Christine Porath: Thanks for having me.

CC: So I have been personally very interested in your work because this subject of community I think is a really important one right now. But before you worked on your book called Mastering Community, you also had one about mastering civility. And I find that a really interesting connection and I was just wondering if you could talk about what's the connection that you felt between this notion of civility and what needed to change there and then this idea of community?

CP: Yeah, so I think with civility, I was just hoping for more of it in the world that we would,

CC: Like a lot of us, yes,

CP: I think for decades actually. And so a personal goal of mine was how do I create more of an incentive or a rationale for why leaders and organizations should care about this? And so after focusing on respect, which I believed you needed to have community, I started realizing sadly how few people felt a sense of community. And I think it applied in my own life as well. And so just kind of saw and was reading and then hearing about the lack of a sense of community at work, even though we spent so much of our time and energy there.

CC: So that was part of why we started doing some work on a similar topic that we just had this sense that, and this was before the pandemic even. We just had this sense that the sources of where people find community, whether as you said, religious groups or clubs or schools, that kind of thing, that the sources were maybe people didn't have those same kinds of things. And so the workplace or work was becoming a place where people needed to find that sense of community. And I'm just curious if you were seeing that in your work as well.

CP: I was. The most inspiring and the real reason that the book came about was actually my brother and his wife Sarah. And seeing what they built as far as, they actually had a really terrible start with a terrible day, which was a diagnosis about their unborn child who was missing a kidney and possibly additional organs. And then they returned home and had a call from a doctor. They had been searching for answers for their two-year-old daughter who was really struggling and no one could figure out what it was. After genetic testing, they learned that she had a very rare chromosome disorder and the doctor didn't have a lot of information on it beyond her mind will probably not develop beyond that of a five-year-old. And so obviously they were feeling a terrible loss and sense of just disillusionment and so forth, but there also wasn't much information out there.

And so my brother Mike did a search on Google and found a PDF file containing six stories. These were nearly a decade old from parents that were caregiving and were sharing stories about kids that had up to 40 plus seizures a day. And while they were really heartbreaking, they also contained joy and humor. And Mike felt like if they could do it, so could he and Sarah as far as parenting Annabel, and hopefully providing as much as possible a life of happiness and independence. And so just a couple months later, they encountered another parenting challenge with her about how to feed herself. And again, after going to experts and all these sources, he ended up posting it to a message board and within an hour, a woman from around the world answered with a solution around, oh wow. Yeah, it was fascinating. I mean, they learned how to put a sock, like cutting two holes: a hole for her thumb, a hole for her forefinger.

CC: Help her with small motor skills, right?

CP: Yes, exactly. So the pinch your grasp, she learned it that way and within a couple of weeks she had mastered it. And so he found that a lot of these things are just lived health experiences and oftentimes you need others that are coping with these same challenges. And so it really was about, okay, how do we create community so that people can share information, can share support? And Mike shared that friends and family are great, but so much of this boils down to shared experiences. And so what happened was they created The Mighty, and within several years it had become the largest health community in the world with people helping each other really and supporting each other. And so I really saw how they were able to do this and create so much good for people, especially those who were struggling. And so that was a wonderful lesson for me. If they can do this in the face of challenges, what could leaders and organizations do to create community for people?

CC: Yeah. Well, let's unpack that a little bit more because as we were talking about before we started recording the podcast, you have just taught a class on community for an MBA program. And I noticed that there were no classes on community when I did my MBA. It was just not something, it wasn't a skillset that businesses were really thinking about, but now it feels like priorities for business leaders have changed a lot. They've recognized that employee wellbeing at least is an issue that they need to address. So I want to connect it back to this idea of community. And if you could talk a little bit about how creating a community at work could help support some of those issues that leaders are thinking about..

CP: I mean, I think what struck me was that when Mike said he thought they were solving health crises and challenges for people, and he said actually he realized that they were solving for loneliness and isolation. And I think what I was seeing in the data from organizations, so there was data from over 20,000 people that Tony Schwartz and I were able to collect with Harvard Business Review. And so these were people working in all different industries at all different levels. And one of the things that popped for me in the data was that over 65% of people claimed that they had no sense of community at work. And that was all well before the pandemic. And then I connected that to outcomes. And what we found was that people that had a sense of community were 74% more engaged. They were 81% more likely to stay with the organization and reported 83% higher thriving at work.

They felt like they were moving forward. All of that and some of the work that Gretchen Spreitzer and I had done looking at thriving at work, the community was clearly creating a sense of thriving. What are the benefits of that? And so looking across six different organizations, what we found is that when people feel a sense of thriving, they perform 16% better, rated objectively by bosses. They also are 32% more committed. Their burnout decreases 1.3 times and they report 61% better health. So a lot of different benefits that organizations and leaders are looking for, if you can create some sense of community or connection

CC: That's pretty powerful data and a pretty powerful argument about why we should start paying attention to creating community. So let's talk about that a little bit because you've identified six pillars of community, and some of them actually kind of surprised me when I was reading it. And the first one is respect. I'd love to hear a little bit more about that one because I hadn't thought about that. In terms of the way you shape community, can you tell us about what you found about that?

CP: Sure. Well, respect to me, it's very tough to have a sense of community or a sense that you belong to a community. So why would I want to be a part of it if I don't feel respected? So I think people desperately want to feel valued, appreciated, and heard. And that same data set of 20,000 people, the number one thing that moved the outcomes, like the leader behavior that mattered most was feeling respected. And that was more important than feeling recognized, getting useful feedback, even opportunities for learning and growth.

CC: Interesting.

CC: Yeah. I want to ask some more about what respect looks like. And I know that might seem like a silly question, but in some ways I could see that we all go, yeah, I respect other people, but maybe some of our behaviors or some of the things that we're not aware of come out as disrespect. Were there things that you found in your work that you'd say, well, this is kind of an example of being disrespectful or how to shift that into being respectful?

CP: Yeah, I mean, you bring up an excellent point, which is the idea that this is all in the eyes of the beholder. So it's not about bad people or bad intentions, I think it stems or ties to a lack of self-awareness. So we may be doing things where we feel like I'm trying to be, treat them with dignity or respect or I come into every interaction. I'm not looking to make anyone feel bad. And yet for leaders, it might be interrupting people, it might be multitasking such that you're not looking at them while they're trying to give you some really important news. It might be not asking how they are not tuning into them at all. So I would hear from graduates of really talented folks that they had left jobs because their boss would just blow by them in the hallway and they just thought, I'm working so hard for them, and they're not even checking in with me, much less making eye contact. It mattered a lot. And so these basic things that we took for granted I think have been a little bit lost maybe these days.

CC: Yeah, it's so interesting. I had a boss once, whenever I had to go into his office, he took every single phone call that came through and I'd be sitting there trying to talk to him, and the phone would ring, and then he'd pay attention to that. And I sat there for the longest time while it seemed like every other conversation in the world was more important than what I was trying to do with him. So I am sure we've all got plenty of examples that we can talk about that we've run into in our careers. Another topic that you talk about in terms of community is this idea of boosting wellbeing. And that was another one that I found kind of surprising, like, well, okay, how does that connect with the idea of creating community?

CP: Yeah, I mean, I think it's really hard for people to plug in and give their best to a community without feeling good. One of the main reasons or the main reason that people report why they're rude or disrespectful is because they feel stressed or overwhelmed. And so can we do better as far as creating conditions or even just encouraging people to take care of themselves? One of the things that Tony Schwartz and I found in that large dataset was that when leaders both encouraged and role modeled sustainable work practices, so that might be exercising or that might be setting a precedent for recovery, not always having to be on, so to speak, all of those things, it made a huge difference when leaders did both. Ideally there were some policies or some encouragement from the leader, but if the leader wasn't living that way, it wasn't helping.

And one example of some really interesting research that I stumbled upon was Dr. Matthew Walker and their work around how an hour less of sleep is actually like a social repellent. And so, we don't necessarily realize it where of course we're suffering a bit, we're tired and that, but we're working hard, we're showing up and everything. Well, others feel that, and they actually, it's like a repellent. They're less likely to want to interact with us, to work with us, to talk to us. And unfortunately, they catch that and they pass it onto others in the community.

CC: Really, it's like a contagion kind of thing.

CP: It's like a contagion. And that's the same thing that we find with disrespect. Unfortunately, we catch it from others, they're bad mood, that kind of thing, just feeling a little belittled or a little impatient, that kind of thing, which is, again, not bad intentions, but it ends up playing out such that it takes people off track, it's distracting. They're wondering what it says about them. What we find about disrespect is it leads to worse performance, worse creativity, worse engagement, and the same applies for witnesses.

CC: I just want to ask about that. If I observe somebody being rude as opposed to it causing me to be repelled a little bit, like, oh, what a jerk. I actually can pick that up?

CP: Definitely. Yes, absolutely. So again, it's not necessarily conscious, but you think about someone that mistreats you on the way to work or cuts you off in the car, and you think, obviously you're not looking to then take it out on the person that you are doing a project with first person you see in the office. And yet we have some of these toxic influences that we're not feeling as good. We may be distracted thinking about what should I have done? So it's very distracting to people, and even if you're just a witness, you're picking up on it and it's probably coloring your mood or your emotions. What we find is the cognitive effects are really extreme, meaning it takes people off track. Even if we take in negative words on social media, what we find is we can't focus as well. We aren't attentive to information as well. Working memory operates about 18% slower. So all of this, of course, affects how we perform, and that's a problem.

CC: Yeah. So I want to go back to something you said earlier, talking about just the effects of the pandemic a little bit. And I'm curious because it seemed like there was a lot of incivility kind of going on around that time to put it lightly. And I wondered what you saw in terms of the impact of the pandemic on people building community, because when you mentioned social media, I was thinking about, man, there was some pretty bad blood floating around there.

CP: Yeah, I think unfortunately, all of these things have escalated as far as what we see unfortunately, particularly for people on the front lines, whether that's healthcare, whether that's the airlines, whether that's the coffee shops or things like that, it's really problematic in the sense of trying to protect them from some of this. But the other thing, you mentioned community, and one of the things we saw, and this was data that we collected with the conference for women, and we saw that a sense of community over the course of the pandemic had dropped 37%. And so we already were not in a good place. If you think about 65% of people don't feel any sense of community, and then that drops another 37%. So I think it's a very challenging time still, and it's going to be a while, I think before people are feeling good and how leaders and organizations figure out, okay, how can I boost a sense of connection or community, particularly if we're not necessarily working together or working face-to-face in ways that we were.

CC: So you mentioned some companies in your book that have done a pretty good job, and I was just wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what are the things they're doing that can help build community? Because it feels like some of the things you're talking about, like civility, individual behavior, how does a leader manage that?

CP: Yeah. Well, I think one program that I thought was really fantastic, and they started this before the pandemic was Cisco. They had a "love and loathe" that they were collecting data each week. So it was almost like a pulse. Even the name is kind of interesting. The whole goal was to try to capture one thing that people loved and one thing that they loathed in the past week around work or how they were feeling, but they answered a few questions as well. And the data went to not only HR, but more importantly their manager. And so their manager was able to have a pulse on how my people are doing? And if someone had a heavy week, like the CHRO shared with me, a very optimistic person. And yet one week during the pandemic, she said, it's been a very heavy week. And Chuck Robbins, the CEO, who the state went to, scheduled a meeting at 8:00 AM Monday morning. This was Friday afternoon. So it was a way for people to check in and make sure, are you okay? What's going on? How can I help? What can we do? And it just opened a door, I think, to conversations as people told me about them, around, okay, can I be supportive? I know what's going on. I can be more helpful, basically. And it also gave them some information around what they liked and didn't like about their work, which was helpful as far as scheduling projects or pulling people into their strengths and maybe limiting weaknesses.

CC: Another thing I found a little surprising was really the way your book is organized, because it feels like the first part of it is talking very much about community and kind of more organizational level society culture. And then the second one really gets into more individual things like self-awareness, which is a question that I think I asked Amy Gallo this question when we did a podcast with her last season, but with self-awareness, I'm always curious, how do I know if I'm actually self-aware, I might think I'm like, I'm great, I'm fine. I got this handled, but how do I know that? And then how does self-awareness actually connect back to this idea of building community?

CP: So most people aren't self aware, I mean, I guess that's the safe bet if you're going to make one, but my friend and collaborator, Tasha Euric has done some wonderful work on this. And what she has found is that 95% of people believe that they are self-aware. Sure. And yet, of course she has found that only 10 to 15% of people actually are self-aware. But the main thing, and a lot of this stems from Marshall Goldsmith's work is really around gathering feedback from people around what are things that are maybe contributing to my success, whether that's leading or on this team, and what are two or three things that I could use some improvement on? And so it's the idea of 360 feedback, but you can think about these as even casual conversations over coffee or lunch.

And Tasha talks about a lot of different tools, and I try to include a lot in the book of things that you can do, going to dinner with someone and asking them questions or finding ways to gather feedback and hone in on our blind spots since we all have them. And it's really helpful that we gain greater self-awareness if we want to contribute to our communities in ways that feel good to others.

CC: And that's really hard to do, I think, to not only ask for the feedback, but to hear the feedback or to give the feedback. I mean, that can be really challenging because a lot of us don't feel comfortable necessarily being really direct. But I think you also talk about the whole idea of candor and how does that help?

CP: Yeah. So I got that from Kim Scott and her wonderful work on radical candor, and she even calls it compassionate candor. And I think that that's a really great way to encourage people to use it. They might feel more comfortable with that, that really the feedback is meant to be a gift and that you're helping others improve themselves and improve the community by providing some information. But radical candor, what I love about it, you care personally. And I think that's where respect comes in. These could be very little things that you're doing to show that people matter. And then what she talks about is you can challenge more directly in ways that people aren't as defensive, for example. So I think it's that idea. If you care personally, it gives you a lot more latitude to challenge directly in ways that people respond well to, which means that the chances of them improving a behavior or improving themselves and showing up better for the community is much more likely.

CC: There's another question that I want to ask you about something in your work that was a term I hadn't heard of or thought of before, which is this idea of a neutral mindset. Because we always think about having a growth mindset, a positive mindset, and those kinds of words. And so what is a neutral mindset? How is that different and how does that help people?

CP: Yeah, so this really comes from my late friend Trevor Moawad, who he coached athletes in particular. That's where he started his work. And it really was about this idea of you just focus on the next play or that next thing that you can control. So what it's trying to do is limit potentially the negativity or the past performance that might be dragging you down and get you very focused on that next thing that you could influence in a positive way. And so you don't get stuck nearly as much, and your chances for having a positive performance or positive influence on people is much greater. And he talks a lot about what can you do to be better or more likely to adopt the neutral mindset. So things like controlling the negativity and minimizing what we're taking in, let's say on social media or minimizing who we're spending time with if they're really negative, things like that.

But it's this whole idea of mindset effects, how we face stress and challenges and setbacks, and whether we develop the ability to achieve long-term performance by focusing on that next little bit that we can control.

CC: So before I let you go, I have to ask a question that we've been asking all of our guests this season because we're really focused on things that are having an impact, a positive impact on people or the planet. And I would love to hear a story from you because it sounds like you've worked with so many diverse people and done so many different things. What's a story about someone or a group that really made a positive impact on you or people in the recent years?

CP: Yeah, so I've had the great privilege to work with the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill women's soccer team, and their coach, Anson Dorrance, who's won 22 national Championships, and we're working on a book together. But what he is brilliant at besides winning, is really growing people, I would say, or developing a culture where people can grow. And I personally have learned so much, this is my third season with them, that around how do you construct a culture where people would have information, like he has a competitive cauldron, so they're constantly getting information about where they are on a daily basis, but also how do you balance that with the sense of connection or community? Because you hear these players say that despite how challenging it is, in many ways they feel like they're a family and they look out for one another. Like who's head may be hanging after a tough day or after some kind of personal or team loss.

And I think that that balance of competition and community, which is so often prevalent in work teams or organizations, is really challenging to achieve. And I think that he, and they do a brilliant job of it. And certainly I think I've seen people grow in ways that are really amazing.

CC: Yeah, that phrase that you said a moment ago about getting our internal narrative closer to the truth is something that's really going to stick with me for a while. That's a good one to try and think about. It has been just such a pleasure talking to you today, Christine. I feel like we have a lot of things we could keep talking about, but I'm going to let you go and say thank you so much for joining us today.

CP: Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it. Thank you for being here with us at Work Better. Rebecca, can you tell our audience about our guest next week?

RC: Next week we're talking to Scott Sunn Shine. Scott's a professor of management at Rice University. He wrote Stretch, and then he co-wrote Joy at Work with Marie Kondo, who you might remember from her Netflix series, sparking Joy. That was everywhere for a while. He says, unsatisfying work is literally making people sick, and he'll share his research, which he says proves the phrase Joy at work does not have to be an oxymoron.

CC: Thanks, Rebecca. I think you really will want to hear this conversation. And if you enjoyed our conversation today with Christine, please share this podcast with a friend or colleague and visit us at steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox. Thanks again for being here with us, and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.