

# Becoming the Leader People Don't Want to Leave (S8:E2) - Transcript

## PODCAST

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*The coolest part about leadership is that it matters. The hardest part about leadership is that it matters every day. So what can we do every day to help maintain that consistency? That's what this is all about. It's doing small things. Over a long period of time.*

*That's how we create change. And so small things in the workplace, small things in the decor, small things in the lighting, small, all that matters.*

The data says: people don't leave their job, they leave their manager. But what makes a good manager? And how do you ensure your team doesn't leave? My guest today went undercover to find out what workers really want. And what he found wasn't a bigger paycheck or more vacation days.

Welcome to Work Better. The Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon and today we're tackling one of the toughest leadership issues: employee attraction, retention and engagement.

My guest today is Clint Pulver – author, keynote speaker, and workplace expert – best known for his work as the “undercover millennial”.

*If you are in a level of influence, if you are a people leader, you're the number one reason why people stay. You're also the number one reason why people choose to leave.*

Clint shares practical tips, personal stories, and an energetic take on how to create workplaces people never want to leave.

Here's my conversation.

**Chris Congdon:** Hi, Clint. Welcome to Work Better.

**Clint Pulver:** Thanks for having me. It's an honor to be here.

**Chris Congdon:** Well, I'm really interested in hearing more about your work because we're always thinking about the employee experience. How do we help people stay more engaged, retain them? And in your work, you talk a lot about mentorship versus management, so I wanna unpack that a little bit.

But I'd like to start with a story that you tell about being seen as a kid, about how this kind of helped crystallize your work for you. So can you share with us the story about really how you felt, seen and heard as a child?

**Clint Pulver:** Yeah, so when I was a little kid, I had a hard time sitting still. I still have a hard time sitting still. And while I was in class as a fifth grader, I would just constantly move. I would tap, I would take a pencil, I would move my feet, I would move my hands. I just had a lot of energy and I was told to sit on my hands. I was told to sit still. I was sent to the principal's office. Again and again and again.

Until one day I had a teacher. His name was Mr. Jensen and as I was tapping, he told me to hold still, but then he also said, "I need to see you after class, you and me are, we're gonna have a conversation." And I'm thinking, this is it, like I'm getting kicked outta school as a 10-year-old. This is the end of the line.

And the class dismissed the bell rung. It was just me and him. He pulled me to the back of the room. He sat me down. He goes, "listen, you tap a lot, you tap in my class, and you tap in everybody else's, and you're just constantly moving." He goes, "I, watch as you write with your right hand. And then you tap with your left hand, and then while doing the assignment, you switch the pen and you start writing with your left hand, and then you tap with your right hand."

And he said, "I think you're ambidextrous." And I had no idea what that meant. And he just simply asked, he said, can you tap your head and then rub your belly at the same time? And I could do it. And he goes, now can you switch it? And he just said, Clint, I don't think you're a problem. I just think you're a drummer.

Christine, I'm someone who believes in the power of moments. I think in our lives, we don't really remember days in our lives. We remember the moments. And in this moment, Mr. Jensen, that old teacher, leaned back in his desk and he opened up the top drawer and he reached inside and he took out my very first pair of drumsticks.

**Chris Congdon:** How cool.

**Clint Pulver:** Put 'em in my hands and he said, listen, "I want you to take these sticks and I want you to just keep 'em in your hands and let's see what happens." And that was over 25 years ago. And for 25 years, I have traveled and recorded and performed all over the world as a professional drummer. I've been on America's Got Talent, I played the drums with the Blue Man Group, Tim McGraw, Carrie Underwood. My whole college education was paid for through music scholarships.

**Chris Congdon:** Holy moly.

**Clint Pulver:** And I don't say all of that to go, oh, wow, -good for you, Clint. I'm saying that because of one moment where somebody changed a perspective and instead of seeing a problem, they saw an opportunity and in doing so, it changed my life forever. And it is a big part of who I am and what we go out and train organizations all over the world to become.

**Chris Congdon:** Yeah, I think that's such an important insight that you can reframe something that people might see as a problem and think about that in a different way, and we can be doing that with people in our organizations.

So, I know right now you go out into the workplace a lot, and I know you kind of call yourself the undercover millennial, and find out a lot about employee experiences. And I'm really interested to see or to hear more about your perspective on what you're finding.

**Clint Pulver:** Yeah, there's a gap. There's always a gap between upper leadership versus the mid-level tier or even lower level tier of an entry-level employee. There's no incentive for an employee when, especially when, things aren't going well, to go up to a boss or to go up to a manager and say, "Hey, listen, Phil, Susan, this could help you. Every time we win as a team, you as the manager, you take all the credit. Oh, also, the team wanted me to tell you every time we lose as a team, you, you blame everybody else. Happy Tuesday.

**Chris Congdon:** That's a pretty direct conversation.

**Clint Pulver:** Most employees don't say that, right? There's no incentive for them to tell a manager or a boss how they really feel. And so instead, what do we find that employees do? They leave, they go find a different job, they go find a different industry. They go find a competitor, or even worse, they mentally check out and then they stay.

And so my space and what we have done as a researcher for the last six and a half years, we've worked with over 498 different organizations, and I have, as of this year, interviewed over 11,000 employees undercover.

And it gave me the ability, because of my age, to go into workplaces as someone who was looking for a job. And I would go up to these employees before I would apply or look to be hired for the job. And I would just say, "what's it like to work here? I'm just curious. I'm thinking about applying. Would you recommend it?" And they always get quiet. They look around, you know it feels like an illegal drug exchange. And then they tell me everything.

What we're able to do is to come in between that gap and hear the real stories about what employees are experiencing. And in doing so, my goodness, now 11,000 employees, there are trends. There are things that I don't care if it's in the workspace, if you're in design, if you work in plumbing, construction, the medical industry, there are universal truths from generation to generation. It doesn't matter if you're a Gen Z or you're a boomer. These are universal truths that we were able to find that great leaders were doing. Where people didn't hate the job, but they loved the job and why that was the magic and the reason why we wrote the book, "I love it here." I called it, "I love it Here", because that was the coolest part of all of the research was that when I would go into a workspace and I'd say, "what's it like?" And people would say, "I love it here." That's what the book's about.

**Chris Congdon:** Well, I'm dying to know why. Is there one or two things that you would say for leaders that we need to practice differently?

**Clint Pulver:** Let's dive into this. One thing that I hear a lot from leaders currently in, in the workspace is, is nobody wants to work.

Nobody. No. You know, COVID kind of was, it was the great, exit, right? It was the, everybody left and then there was like the great reentry, and now there's kind of like this great, like stagnation. It's just so funny how things trend throughout time. But, it's cool because the universal principles truly, I believe, from a researcher standpoint, stay the same.

For example, when people say nobody wants to work, the question I always pose to the boss or to the manager is, "do they wanna work for you?" If you are in a level of influence, if you are a people leader, you're the number one reason why people stay. You're also the number one reason why people choose to leave.

67% of all turnover can be traced back to leadership. As a leader, if you are a people influencer, you lead individuals. You have to understand first and foremost that you cannot change anybody. That's one thing that leaders I see still to this day that they do not understand. I can manipulate, I can force, I can scare, I can even use the friendship card or the relationship card to move people. But ultimately as a leader, we cannot change anybody. Everybody has the ability to choose and change themselves.

And so as a leader, you have to influence, you have to become the person that people choose. When people hated their jobs, they always talked about a manager. When people loved their jobs, they described that manager as a mentor.

I would say first and foremost, there was one highlight from all of the research, a universal truth. It was that mentorship versus management always wins. What do I mean by that? Mentorship is unique. Because mentorship has to be earned.

You can't become the mentor in the story until the mentee invites you into their heart. If you've ever had a mentor in your life, you chose them. That was someone that you looked at them and they had confidence, credibility, competence. They would be honest with you, and they also cared about you. They became somebody that, because of them, you got to live a better story.

I think this is a really unique insight. There were two variables in every workplace that would determine whether somebody as an employee was thriving at work or just surviving.

And those two variables are standards in the workplace and then connection, standards and connection.

**Chris Congdon:** What do you mean when you say standards?

**Clint Pulver:** So standards would be things that we can trace, metrics, -are we profitable? -statistics, are we better today than we were yesterday? A standard would be a vision statement. I need you to show up on time, responsibilities of the job. Things again that they are the tangible sides of business.

The connection side is the intangible side of what we do in leadership. It's making sure that people feel seen, they feel heard, they feel understood. It's when you, as a boss, realize that your employees have a life outside of work. So that stuff is hard to trace. There is no real tangible statistic to that. It's harder, it's more intangible. But those are the two variables that we will use.

We could always determine there were four types of managers in every workplace. The first manager was the removed manager. This was the individual, they were low on standards, they were also low on connection. What did this create in the employee workforce? Disengagement. Everybody became removed from them because they were removed from the job. This is -the individual, you're burnt out, you're tired. The thought of coming to work makes you nauseous. You're living for the weekends. You should have retired 15 years ago and you're still here. That kind of management always creates disengagement.

The second manager was the buddy manager. This was the individual that was low on standards, high on connection. This is the manager that, "I love you and we're friends. Let's go hang out on the weekend." We play Xbox on the weekend and then Monday morning they try to lead and the employee's like, "I just saved you in Call of Duty on Friday, Steve." What? Now you're the manager? So that combination of low standards, high connection creates entitlement. This is where the employees become more of the HR director than the HR director. Because the HR director would rather be liked more than they're respected.

The third was the controller. This is the manager that's high on standards, low on connection. So this is the old -command and control. I'm not here to be your friend. Do your job. You don't want to be here.

Leave easy, come easy go. You want me to love you as a boss? No smile. I give you a paycheck. Tomorrow's gonna be worse.

**Chris Congdon:** That was my first boss.

**Clint Pulver:** Yeah, totally. And, and so what that creates is, rebellion, pushback. These are the managers and the lead. You go head to head with every employee, fear-based manipulation. Sometimes it gets results, but the results never last.

And so that tactic of, well, you're not gonna go anywhere, or it's, it's a, it's an employer's market. Still, I think, it is a scary place to be because it's not sustainable, it never lasts, and this is why the fourth manager was complete magic. And I call them, of course, the mentor manager, the individual that was high on standards, but they were also equally as high on their ability to connect with the employee.

And what did this create? Respect, high standards, high connection. It was the secret formula that time and time again, created results, allowed a company to be profitable to grow, but it also allowed for people to be seen. You make those deposits of trust, it allows a company to make withdrawals for high standards.

It's a hard balance, but it was a beautiful, simplistic way after six years of research to be able to explain, where do you fit? Sometimes you're all for one day as a manager, but the goal is to become the mentor.

**Chris Congdon:** So Clint, one of the things that I reflect on when I listen to you talk about this. Is whether people who are in leadership roles today have learned how to do the high connection. Like for some people they, they come naturally and in one of your examples it's like maybe it comes too naturally, but it feels like, as an organization, you know, I mentioned my first boss was definitely high on the standards part of things. I don't think connections even really existed. Yeah. But, like, how do we learn?

What are some of the practices that we can do as leaders to learn to get that right balance?

**Clint Pulver:** First and foremost, none of this works if you don't love people.

**Chris Congdon:** Okay.

**Clint Pulver:** The biggest problem I see in the workplace is so many managers that got promoted because they were really good at their job.

They were really good at sales. They were really successful in some element. And so the next move for the company was to just promote them into, into leadership, to promote them into management. And there's a definite lack of management and leadership development training in organizations. But I think above that is, do you really love people?

If, if you are not in this because you love people, you're in this because you love power, you love a higher pay raise, you're just, you're just gonna be the controller. You're gonna be the removed individual, you're gonna burn out, you're going to be the problem that we see so often in the workplace. So first and foremost, check yourself and look in the mirror and go, do I really want to advocate for people? Do I really want to help people live better because they're influenced and around me?

The second thing that I would add is that sometimes I've heard leaders or leadership training, gurus or trainers or speakers say, you should become the leader that you wish you had. Be the leader that you wish you had in the workplace.

And for me, I have found greater relevance and power and success in the leaders that we have trained in helping them to understand, no, no, no. Become the mentor you were lucky enough to have.

Maybe not everybody, but I would say a lot of us have had, whether it was a teacher, a parent, a grandparent, a friend, a boss, an individual that has made your life a better story, somebody that you chose, somebody that, because of their influence, allowed you to see further than you could have on your own.

Those are two really cool places to start.

**Chris Congdon:** Clint, we've been living through and you mentioned, the pandemic and the kind of ups and downs of the way the world of work has been particularly over the past five years. To me, and I've been working for quite a while. It feels like there's been more change in the past five years.

Then there's been a generation and that can be really difficult for people in leadership roles, it could be difficult for employees. It feels like what you're talking about feels fairly evergreen, eternal, like it always makes sense for you to be a mentor and to make strong connections with your people.

Are there any other things that with the context that we're working in right now that you'd say we need to focus on even more?

**Clint Pulver:** Yeah, 100%. Your employees will tell you how to lead them better than any Forbes article.

**Chris Congdon:** Okay.

**Clint Pulver:** The three things that every Gen Z employee's looking for right now, or here's the five things you need to be using in AI to be a more effective leader and retain the millennials, all of that. Throughout my years, again, as a researcher, all of the undercover research that we have seen, the moment that a leader stops looking at people as a generation, if they stop looking at the headlines and they start looking at their people, the people in front of them, individuals are unique.

And I think the moment that we try to categorize individuals into a stereotype or into a bucket based off of their age or based off of even current trends. Now, trends and the world that we live in definitely influences how we work. It influences our perspective, but at the core, we cannot forget that we have an individual in front of us.

That is our employee. If you become the mentor in the story, I will die on this hill. They will tell you how they want to be led better than anything else that you can do. So how do we do that?

**Chris Congdon:** Yeah. How do you get real answers from people if you're not an undercover person asking about, would you wanna work here?

**Clint Pulver:** Yep. So first of all, it's a pattern. Everything that we've talked about on this podcast, do you love people? Are you creating those relationships? Have you become the mentor in the story? If those things are in place, your heart is in the right place. You've built that trust. People are choosing you.

There is a relationship established there where you have high standards, but you also have high connection. They look at you and they go, okay, you're an advocate in my story, not just a boss. If we've achieved that, then we can move into what I call the status interview.

I love this because every employee has a status. I came from the medical industry. I worked in the medical field for five and a half years in the operating room, and the doctor would always call out while working and performing surgery. He would say, okay, what's the status of the patient? I need a status. What the doctor was really asking for was, "tell me the heart rate, respiratory rate, body temperature, and blood pressure of the patient."

One of the best things that if I was an employer, right now, I am an employer. I have, I have a team. I run a team of, eight people that I lead. And then I have another organization of 500 people that I oversee and I do this with them frequently. If I was a listener and a people leader this would be the first thing that I would do.

I would take your rock stars, your best people, the people on your team that if they handed you a two weeks resume or a two weeks notice saying that they've gone and found another job, it would put you in a hard spot. Who are the people that you can't do work without?

Create a moment. And you could do this over the phone, you could do it in person. You could go for a walk. You could invite them to lunch. You could call them into your office, begin the meeting, and just start with vocal praise, creating safety, psychological safety. It matters. It's important. Pour into them. Let them know why you need them, why they matter, why they're an asset to your company, and then ask them these three questions.

This is worth the whole podcast right here. This is worth listening, okay? The entire time. The first question, I wanna know, as your employer, what can I do to keep you here? Second question: I wanna know what is getting in the way of your success at work? What else can I do to help you live a better story? What else can I do to help you win? Those three questions. The crazy thing about this, Christine, is most employees are never asked those three questions unless it's in the exit interview.

When an employee comes, they've handed you their two weeks notice. Sure. If they even do that. And you go, "come on, is there anything that we can do to keep you? Christine, I need you." It's a busy season. I didn't see this coming. Can we, let's talk about pay. Let's talk about work life now. Right? And then all of a sudden it dawns on you as a leader, I should have asked these questions six months ago.

**Chris Congdon:** Yeah, we don't ask those questions until moments of crisis that causes you to think about it and how do we make that a practice that we, we have those conversations more frequently.

Hey Clint, I wanna ask you when we were talking about disruption earlier, and you kind of mentioned this, but I just wanna go back to it, the situations in which we're working in forming connections have changed for a lot of people. It's much more common for organizations to have some level of remote work and that varies by organization and it's kind of, it's fairly stable right now, I'd say, but it has changed the way that we interact with each other, our kind of patterns of behavior.

Do you think there's any particular advice that you would give to leaders where either their teams are distributed, they're not face-to-face. Maybe they're working in different countries or different locations or working from home. We're just interacting more on screen sometimes than we are in person. Any thoughts about that?

**Clint Pulver:** My thoughts are it's hard. It's really hard. And the more virtual we are becoming and the more some people love that and they prefer that. I'm a big advocate of meeting people where they're at. You know, I've got some people, they love to be in the workplace.

They love to be in the environment and the colleagues and the friendship and the collaboration and a team environment. Other people are like, I hate that. And so, again, for me, always what we have seen is when a boss is able to go to an employee and if that is an option to work from home, okay, let's talk about it.

And I'm gonna, we're gonna have high standards, but I gotta have a high connection. And so it's that constant balance. If you're not able to maintain those high standards, the profitability, the productivity, the effectiveness, because people are working from home, then things have gotta change, right?



And our standards are then lowering. And that's why you see a lot of bosses and a lot of organizations bringing people back into the office. Because just in a virtual setting, there's just no comparison to what that equates to. When you're in a workspace with individuals working alongside them, the camaraderie is the culture that exists in an environment where you're with people, not just on a screen.

**Chris Congdon:** Yeah, and you're right. It is hard to get that right balance between the standards and the connections. What I do wanna get your sense of this because if you have gone undercover into a bunch of organizations to do research. You've probably seen a lot of different types of physical spaces and a lot of our listeners are really interested in what we can do to the physical workplace to help on all kinds of things – engagement, collaboration, psychological safety – you name it. There's a lot of things. And I'm curious what things you've seen that you would share with our listeners in terms of some of the best experiences or best practices you've seen?

**Clint Pulver:** Totally. I dedicated a massive part of my book on this because it was a huge part of creating an organization that people never wanted to leave, a place that reflected first and foremost. This is what I would say. Does the workspace reflect your values? Does it reflect the vision?

I will never forget the organization weave going into their workspace. Still to this day, out of all of the organizations I worked for, it's still a highlight for me. Their core mission statements were three things. Our people are hungry, our people are creative, and our people are caring. Those three things. And then what they did is they attached a mascot to each one of those words.

So the bear was hungry, the sloth was creative, and then the gorilla was caring. So then all over that workspace. Sloths gorillas, pictures of, of bears, just this fun, unique environment.

And everybody, I believe if you're, if you're facing in the right direction, all you have to do is keep walking. The problem is most people don't know what that direction is. And when employers do that really well from keeping the mission statement simple to allowing the workspace to reflect what that mission statement is, it is a reflection of where we're walking. This is what we're doing. This is what we stand for. This is who we are as an organization. From the cubicle to the desk, to the ceiling, to the decor, to the furniture, it represents who we are as an organization.

I will say this very quickly. The coolest part about leadership is that it matters. The hardest part about leadership is that it matters every day. So what can we do every day to help maintain that consistency? That's what this is all about. It's doing small things. Over a long period of time.

That's how we create change. And so small things in the workplace, small things in the decor, small things in the lighting, small, all that matters. It's doing small things consistently over a long period of time. That again, that's how you win in this.

**Chris Congdon:** Well, Clint, I was gonna ask you for a closing thought, but I think you kind of went there naturally is just this idea that leadership matters and that it matters every day. It is a really important thing for people to think about you. You kind of don't get to take off a day and say, I'm not gonna be a leader today. If you've taken on that responsibility. Do you have one other thought that you wanna close with or did we pretty much catch it?

**Clint Pulver:** I'll close with this. I think it's important sometimes on these podcasts or leadership trainings, we, we sit here and we say all the things that leaders need to be doing better or all the things leaders should be doing differently. But I would like to end the podcast by telling every leader that's listening to this, that you're probably doing better than you think you are.

Sometimes we just don't hear that enough. And leadership is very hard. It is lonely. It can be extremely difficult. It is not all sunshine and rainbows and the incredible leaders that truly love people and dedicate their lives every day to being significant in people's lives and in the workplace.

There's a difference between success and significance. And my final thought would be: you are doing better than you think you are. But also remember that it's not about being the best in the world. It's about being the best for the world, and that's what you get to do. That's what leadership is about, and there is no better calling the thought that again, because of you, somebody goes home, a better dad, a better mom. They live a better story. You're striving to be the best for the world. What a call, what an opportunity, what a privilege. And so thank you to all of the amazing leaders that are striving to do that, and you're doing better than you think you are.

**Chris Congdon:** Well, for our listeners, and to Clint Pulver, you just made me smile.

So Clint, thanks so much for joining us today on Work Better.

**Clint Pulver:** You're welcome, Christine. It was an honor. Thank you.