

Christa Reinhardt:

Welcome To the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast. I'm your host, Christa Reinhardt, Senior Marketing Coordinator here at Vanderbloemen. This week, our CEO and founder, William Vanderbloemen, talks with Tim Stevens, current Executive Pastor at Willow Creek Community Church and former VP of Consulting here at Vanderbloemen. Tim has helped us build our team and he's currently helping other pastors build theirs through Leading Smart Executive Pastor Coaching Network. In this conversation, Tim shares how important trust is when rebuilding a team, especially now post pandemic. He shares successful strategies he has seen, and he emphasizes the importance of setting up a culture team, importing talent, and establishing leadership trust that can ultimately shape the culture of your team. Lastly, he shares some resources available to executive pastors through the Leading Smart Coaching Network. Here's William's conversation with Tim Stevens.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well hey everybody, welcome to the podcast today. I have with me today First Timothy.

Tim Stevens:

I still have the title?

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, actually you don't.

Tim Stevens:

I don't think I do anymore. I don't think I do.

William Vanderbloemen:

You're now a former First Timothy. You're the apocryphal Timothy, how's that?

Tim Stevens:

Okay.

William Vanderbloemen:

Not in the cannon anymore, but we still love you.

Tim Stevens:

Thank you. I'll take it. I'll take whatever I can get.

William Vanderbloemen:

Tim was kind enough to move down to Houston and help build an amazing system for our consultants here. I told him I wanted it to be a scalable, repeatable system and he did such a good job that when he left, and I could see Jesus moving your heart, Tim.

Tim Stevens:

Maybe before I did.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, kind of like, wow. While we were at Willow, I could see heart's racing a little faster. It's like, oh man, we're going... Somehow, this is going... And sure enough, Tim left. But when he left here, if you want to learn how to win at your job, Tim did such a good job of building a system that his replacement was right here on staff and was also named Tim. Boom.

Tim Stevens:

That was the criteria.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's awesome. I mean, who does that? So for those who don't know the inside joke, it used to be there was First Timothy and Second Timothy. I didn't assign these titles. I didn't, wouldn't really like them, but it was right when one elected official was talking about two Timothy that it came out.

Tim Stevens:

That's right.

William Vanderbloemen:

So now First Timothy is apocryphal Timothy and Tim Goche has taken your place. And I can't thank you enough for the great job you'd did leading that team and just putting it in a really sustainable place.

Tim Stevens:

Well, it was a joy and like those... It was almost not quite six years, five, five and a half plus years, which yeah, God surprised me when he moved me back up to the Midwest. That was not part of Tim's plan. First Timothy or Second Timothy's plan. So God surprised us, but it's been 18 months now, I guess, since we worked together down there in Houston.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. Yeah, well you just... The way I understood it was, consulting work's hard, so let's go back to church work because that's easy.

Tim Stevens:

Church work is easy. Yeah. Yeah, I just wanted to kind of float through my fifties, then I can [crosstalk 00:03:26].

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, go somewhere low drama.

Tim Stevens:

Take it easy. That's right.

William Vanderbloemen:

So Tim is now, I'll get the title wrong, but Executive Pastor at Willow Creek with our mutual friend Dave Dummitt, who we got to walk along the path as the elders discovered that was the person God was

calling. And so I have a piece of my heart or soul there at Willow. I have for a long time, but really do now. And I thought we'd have Tim on today to talk about how you rebuild a culture, particularly trust. Because I think with this great resignation that's going on, I think with staffs that literally haven't been together for a year and a half and are having to come together now... We had our first social event when we reopened the office sometime back, it was awful.

William Vanderbloemen:

It was like being at a bad middle school dance where nobody wanted to talk to me about... I mean, and I've told our team that. It wasn't their fault, it's just we didn't even know each other. So I think everyone's stuck with a rebuilding phase right now and who better to talk about that than you, Tim. So I don't know, maybe you should share a little of the journey of how you ended up there and what you walked into and what's going on in 18 months.

Tim Stevens:

Yeah. So yeah, as we were going through, William and I are going through the search process with the elder board at Willow in those late months of 2019, early months of 2020, God just started doing something in my heart towards him. I think it was William, I was recounting this with someone the other day, and there was like a two week period where the elders are saying, "We don't only need a senior pastor, we also need an interim or possibly permanent executive pastor." And we started bouncing around ideas and trying to figure that out to solve that problem for them. And at one point he leaned at me and said, "Maybe you should go do this for three months and then maybe we should loan you to Willow for three months." And it's like, "Nah, that wouldn't make sense."

Tim Stevens:

But anyway, something in that season just pinged my heart, my soul for there's so much need here and I think I could play a part in that. And so God just... That was just internal and I talked to Faith about it, and then to get the call from them, it was the day the world fell apart. It was the same exact day, I got a call that morning from Dave saying, "Hey, would you think about coming and doing this with me?" And I had a meeting with you that same day, saying, "Hey, we're going to have to reduce some staff. We don't know what's going to happen, but the world's closing down."

Tim Stevens:

So anyway, stars aligned and I took that role, knew most of what I was walking into actually, because you and I, the elders had been very open book with us. They wanted us to know everything so we could equip the next senior pastor to know what they needed to know to make a good decision. So knew Willow was coming out of just a horrendous crisis of trust, a very difficult interim season where basically someone called it a leadership lobotomy, pretty much every person on the executive team had left. All of the elders had resigned. So it was a brand new elder board that would admit that they were in over their heads. People that love Jesus and love the church deeply, very competent in their day jobs, but really were thrust into a role that no one should be thrust into and were just having to figure it out.

Tim Stevens:

And then walking in, I remember one of the first days I got there, I said... Well got there, meaning virtual meetings, because we were all locked down. I asked someone, "Hey, tell me about the culture at Willow?" And they said, "Which culture?" And I'm like, "The culture at Willow." And they said, "We don't have a culture. We have lots and lots of subcultures."

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow.

Tim Stevens:

And we took the Vanderbloemen culture tool and just kind of ran it across all of our campuses in different departments and they were exactly right. We had shining spots of really high, positive culture and we had just the cesspool of negative culture in other places.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow.

Tim Stevens:

So it was really a... And then you pile on that just great financial strain that the church was facing. I think 11 days after Dave and I got there on site was when George Floyd was murdered and we had to jump in. We jumped into the relation of the racial tension that was really, really heightened, both because we're in Chicago and both because of Willow's history in those conversations. So what was interesting to me, William, was it was not just with a... I'd never walked into an organization that I had to that had a highly, highly toxic negative culture. I'd always been able to walk into one that was either neutral and you build there, or I think when I walked into Vanderbloemen, it was very positive, got to build on that.

Tim Stevens:

So knowing we were walking into a big challenge, but not knowing the extent of it. And it came down to trust. It came down to trust as far as I think with a positive culture, you believe the best and you grant trust, you deliver trust before it's earned because you have a positive culture and you believe the best about each other. We walked into a place that wasn't just mistrust, but it was because you've been chosen as a leader here, we can't trust you because our leaders fail us. Our leaders have failed us. Both a feeling of that from what happened in 2018, but also just from just leaders have left us abandoned. And so in some senses it was, people were just really good people, but just broken and tired and exhausted and burned out.

Tim Stevens:

I remember meeting with one guy who'd been on staff for decades, this was in the first few weeks. And he said, "I'm not going anywhere, I just don't think I can ever trust again." It was just that kind of sense of just deep, it wasn't disdain, just deep sadness. Someone asked me a couple weeks ago, they said, "Where is it now?" And I said, "Well, if it's a scale of a negative 10 to the positive 10, we were probably pretty close to negative 10 and we might be right around a 1 or a 2 right now." So we're still building in that. But I think began last summer to put some things in place, build some foundation blocks to begin to rebuild the culture.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow. So what would be... If you're listening and you're like, "Oh, we don't have a trust problem, everybody trusts me." No they don't. They're not telling you the truth. But let's just assume it's not all rebuilding fractured trust, but building a team that's been decimated by a pandemic, by whatever the thing is. What are some of the lessons learned so far that you're like, oh, whether you fell into it or do it and did it on purpose, what are some things that might be a culture hack for us?

Tim Stevens:

I think one thing, and this isn't brown-nosing, this is actually true. I think taking the pulse. So Vanderbloemen has a great culture tool for that. So we just three weeks in, just let's just get a benchmark, where are we at? How bad is it? Where is it bad? I think and then using that periodically, annually, whatever, just to, okay, are we making progress? So I think that's really important, just to figure out where we at? And you can do that through lots and lots of relational conversations too, anecdotal, just figuring out where it's at, what the history's been. Now if you've been there a long time, but you're coming out of COVID and it's like we've got a lot of people that left, we've got new people coming on, we're not sure. You probably got a head start on it because you know a lot of people, but I think it's just good to know kind of where you're at.

Tim Stevens:

And then I would... I think about this as like exporting versus importing. I heard someone say, and William, it may have been you, I don't remember who it was said, "You can't change culture," is kind of what they said. And I'm like, "Sure you can." Because I've been in places where it's neutral and you take steps over time. I understand though now, I kind of get it. I still don't know that I agree with it completely. But it would've taken years for us to shift culture. We had to kind of export some and import some. And again, we weren't exporting bad people, but exporting people that were burned out, they were tired, they just didn't have... I had people say, "I just can't, I can't go through another yay ha Christmas season. I just, I'm too tired for this."

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow.

Tim Stevens:

And so last fall as a part of... We had way too many staff as a result of just the church's history, so we just offered everyone on the team, if you want out for any reason, we will financially help make that possible. And it just gave people a graceful exit if they just were, "I'm just, I can't do this. I'm too tired." And then it was importing positive culture. So it was finding people who came, people like Robin Riley from Mariners, Megan Bagnall from Saddleback, Betsy Sunny from North Point. People that came from healthy, positive cultures, that knew what it was like, knew how to build it, and bring them onto our team. We're not asking them to build the same culture from where they were, but they know what a positive culture is. And so importing some of that.

William Vanderbloemen:

So let me see if I'm taking this in right. So the way to change culture is change the people?

Tim Stevens:

I think that is what we had to lean into. Yeah. So it wasn't change all the people.

William Vanderbloemen:

Right.

Tim Stevens:

By any means. But it was also leaning in with the people that have been there for years. And right now, 30% of our staff was here prior to the failures of 2018, 70% are new.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow.

Tim Stevens:

And that will obviously even grow over time. But finding the people that have been around for a long time to have that institutional memory, that have the influence, that had trust that we didn't have because we were new, that also either were kind of leading those areas of bright spots of the culture or could get there quickly. And finding a bunch of those folks has been life giving. And they've come along and jumped in and helped carry it as well. So it's not like the new people are the ones with the positive culture and the previous aren't, it's a mix. But we definitely had to, to speeden up the pace, we had to export and import.

William Vanderbloemen:

I say this with a bit of caution to listener, but I totally agree with you. So I think of culture as two layers and they're probably more than that, but the two that I think, the base layer is, is this a healthy place to work or not? Do people lie or do they tell the truth?

Tim Stevens:

Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

So that I think you can fix over time. Right? But then the, how are we behaving? And are we chronically tired? And is there way too many Eeyores and no Tiggers, or whatever way you want to... I don't know a way to rewire that other than having some fresh faces around. And please don't let that lead to everybody hanging up and a mass firing go on around the church in America today. Don't say, "Well William said you have to go. Sorry." No. But I think you're really onto something. Just particularly the people around the leadership table. And particularly the younger the organization is, I mean, Willow's been around, but it's still a young church. It's not 2, 3, 400 years old.

Tim Stevens:

Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. Yeah. What else would be something that you've learned along the way?

Tim Stevens:

I think we started this, we're really treating this kind of as a church plant because we really needed to go back and look at mission, vision, values, just how we behave, even making sure our statement of faith, all of that was true to who we are and where we're going forward. And so we did that with staff values as well, and just began to pull together teams. Jenny Katherine, who's an associate of you guys, has helped us with this. She only lives about two hours north of us so we consider her a neighbor. She drives down every now and then to help us. So we put together a culture team in April and it was a mix of

people from various campuses, various teams, tenure, ethnicity, gender, all that, maybe 15, 16 people. And we just began to dive deep on, who do we want to be?

Tim Stevens:

And I've heard you talk about, should values be aspirational or should they just be evidence of who we are? In our case, they had to be aspirational because the culture was so bad. We didn't have a choice. If the values reflected who we were, we'd had to say, "We mistrust each other. That's a value." So they had to be aspirational. But this group helped us, which was all staff members, helped us kind of surface these, like discover these with lots and lots and lots of conversations with our staff teams and really journeying deeply on it. So that when we introduced them in early September, there was just a sense of excitement, anticipation, it was really a fun meeting to have. We're going to dive deeper with that here in some meetings in the upcoming weeks of really not operationalizing.

Tim Stevens:

And what I learned from you guys at Vanderbloemen was driving those deep into the employee journey. And we started last... Two days ago was the first time we had someone, several people stand up and say, "Here's a value and where I saw it lived out in the life of someone on staff this week." And as we get those rhythms and over and over and over again and into our onboarding and into how we hire, hiring for the values, all of that, I think it's not going to be fast, but I think in the next two to three years, we're going to see that needle move quite a bit.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's awesome. So the pandemic, boy, I can't imagine starting that whole task all virtual, but it did birth some cool new things. Tell us a little bit about your coaching network. Because I watched it happen for years here, but it's changed now, right?

Tim Stevens:

Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

You've got a whole new way, right?

Tim Stevens:

Yeah. So COVID kind of forced me into it and now I absolutely love it. So yeah, like you mentioned, I'd been coaching a small group, 10 or 12 leaders that would be under the category, depending on the title of executive pastor, executive director, pastor of administration, that kind of title for probably 15 years now once or twice a year. And as it got to the end of 2020, it's like ready to launch again, it's like, okay, people are not ready to travel. So we launched it virtual last January and it's really, really taken off. We've got about 65 leaders in it now. It's growing two or three leaders every month. But we gather together the fourth Monday of every month and it's a couple hours together. We have a facilitator. This month it's a guy named William Vanderbloemen, who's going to talk to us about the great resignation, so looking forward to that.

Tim Stevens:

But we have different facilitators that will lead a 30 to 45, 50 minute discussion, usually interactive with folks with some large group discussion and then we'll break out into smaller groups of about 12 to 15. And we have a cohort leader for each of those and able to drive really deep into kind of what the issues and concerns are. And then we send a gift box every month, which is kind of fun, with often a book, some kind of a leadership book, something fun, swag kind of thing as well, just to surprise people in between. But it's been a really cool thing that has really taken off. And it's not like a fixed group for a year, it's just jump in whenever you want, we do it month to month to month. When it's no longer useful for you, you can cancel and hang with us for years or months or whatever works for you.

William Vanderbloemen:

Coaching on demand.

Tim Stevens:

Yeah, it really is. And actually we just did put all of the material just in the last two months on demand for those that are members so that if either they miss a session or they heard a session and they're like, "My team has to hear this," they can easily go to that library and play it for their team.

William Vanderbloemen:

And it's Leading Smart? Is that right?

Tim Stevens:

Leadingsmart.com. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's great.

Tim Stevens:

Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, we'll send that out in the show notes to everybody. And if you don't, if you're not on that email list, go to vandernews.com. We won't put you on all the other email lists, we're segmenting. So we'll be nice and not fill you... And we won't ask you to take a survey, so a fairly kind list to be on. But Tim I wish you well. I look forward to seeing how God's going to use you guys in the coming years and I think it's going to be a pretty cool story. So thank you [crosstalk 00:20:32].

Tim Stevens:

Thank you so much.

William Vanderbloemen:

And thanks for being here today.

Tim Stevens:

Yeah. Appreciate the conversation. Thank you.

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Christa Reinhardt:

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