

# Working From the InsideOut

By Sarah Loehndorf

## How Management at Whitworth College Builds a Productive and Positive Workforce

**W**hen Max Vandiver, a Whitworth College groundskeeper, tends the landscaping, he's making a lasting impression. "I want people to know that Whitworth is committed to excellence by the first person they meet from school, by coming on the campus and looking on the grounds," said Whitworth president, Bill Robinson.

But the college's reputation extends beyond first impressions. Whitworth is receiving national attention for the way it's run. For two consecutive years, Whitworth has been named the Best Christian Workplace among universities and seminaries by Best Christian Workplaces Institute (BCWI) and *Christianity Today*.

"Whitworth College has been a Christian witness to everybody in Spokane," says BCWI president, Al Lopus, "showing how Christian organizations can make a positive difference in a community."

Robinson, author of *Leading People from the Middle*, offers several suggestions for making a more productive workplace.

As head of a 350-person staff with 2,000-plus students, Robinson bristles at the uncoupling of leading and managing. "Nothing will undo your leadership faster than bad management," he said. "If your constituents can't rely on you for good operations, you're in trouble."

At the same time, he recognizes that one of the leader's primary responsibilities is to communicate the organization's mission and vision in ways that engage and guide employees in their work. For Robinson, that means periodic meetings with employees and regular campus-wide email messages to reinforce Whitworth's distinctive educational commitments to aggressive intellectual inquiry and to the integration of faith and learning.

He's encouraged that results of the BCWI survey and recent accreditation reviews show that Whitworth employees almost universally understand and support the college's mission.

### It Starts at Home

"You have to build a solid foundation internally," he says. "You work from the inside out. Everything from customer relations, direct ministry, networking and public relations relies on the effectiveness of your people."

Although Robinson was elected board chair of the Spokane Regional Chamber of Commerce, he cautions leaders to ask themselves if their involvement in external functions will help

the organization. He calls this the mission test. "Try categorizing your daily tasks. If there's more external involvement with the community and other organizations than time spent directly strengthening your own organization, that's a red flag."



**William P. Robinson is president of Whitworth College in Spokane, Wash.**

### Trust Builds Teamwork

Being part of an effective team requires trust. "One of the key indicators of workplace effectiveness in the BCWI survey involves trust between senior management and employees," says Lopus.

Robinson agrees. "The most important leadership principle I know is: You get what you give. I work hard on trust issues. Trust is your most important asset as a leader. You have to win trust everyday. You have to keep winning it; and the best way to win it is for you to trust first."

### Think Impact

Robinson tries to focus his time on things he can do that make a big difference. "Get involved and do big things, but the little things can also make a difference." He gives the example of calling a graduate after he saw her name appear for giving the college a \$25 gift. While the college operates on an annual budget of \$40 million, Robinson made a quick call to thank her.

He also makes time to eat with the students, hang out in their dorms, have them in his home or play basketball with them. "Sometimes they just show up and ask if I can come out and play. That's resulted in 'Slurpee' runs, yogurt runs, pizza runs and just plain running runs. They're not afraid to ask, and I'm not afraid to tell them 'no way.'"

"We have to ask ourselves if we're doing high impact things. They're not just the big things; they're also the little things that make a big difference in a life," he said.

*Note: For more information, you may email President Bill Robinson at [wrobinson@whitworth.edu](mailto:wrobinson@whitworth.edu).*

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