Joanna Meyer:

You're listening to the Faith and Work Podcast, where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor and society through our daily work.

Joanna Meyer:

Hey, hello and welcome to the Faith and Work podcast. I'm Joanna Meyer, I'm joined today by Brian Gray, a member of the Denver Institute team. Hi, Brian.

Brian Gray:

Hey, Jo. How are you doing?

Joanna Meyer:

Really good. Before we hit record, we were talking about today's topic, which, well, the underlying route of today's topic is things that drive you nuts about working with your coworkers and practical tools to help you resolve some of those conflicts intentions. But before we launch in with our more serious topic, I'm very curious to know, Brian, what have you learned about yourself that drives your coworkers?

Brian Gray:

Yeah, we're going to out ourselves then on this one?

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah.

Brian Gray:

All right. So I have a messed up relationship with my workload, and I don't feel relaxed unless I get enough done. And so I've gotten the feedback from my coworkers that they could tell when I had too much on my to-do list, because I would be head down, silent, not like jovial guy, stopped telling jokes, et cetera. And another, she might even be listening, a coworker of mine who I value very much, Olivia, said, "It's like you brewed over there." So I haven't been able to do anything about my to-do list, but I'm telling way more jokes in the office now. So I look like a really light, airy, fun person.

Joanna Meyer:

You can protect a very intense energy in a small space.

Brian Gray:

I get real intense, and I'm not even aware of it at all when I'm under the pile.

Joanna Meyer:

I think I'm on the other end of the spectrum. I'm a very curious person. I'm also a verbal processor, and so often if something's going through my head, I'm expressing it out loud through the air across the office. And so people will be sitting at their desks and I'll just start talking, or I'll talk to a colleague who's three desks away, and meanwhile, the two people in the middle have to hear my verbal processing. So I've had to learn how to have a conversation off to the side, put my headphones in, just strain my thoughts.

Brian Gray:

But we've all gotten great new Mexican food recipes off of one of these.

Joanna Meyer:

We do, I don't know if our listeners realize, but one of my hobbies is mastering the art of authentic Mexican cooking. So I have discovered some great recipes along the way, as both Brian and Catherine, our producer, can attest.

Well, today we're talking about a tool that has been so useful for the Denver Institute Team. It's something we call our user guide. It's a document that allows every member of the team to begin to express their unique working style, in that by reading that together we're able to better understand our colleagues. It's really been a fun process, it's easy and it's very, very practical. And so Brian was instrumental in creating this tool. We will make it available for you as a free download in our show notes today, but to whet your appetite for the potential of this tool, I just want to hear more about it from Brian and to share this idea with you. So Brian, tell us a little bit about what is the user guide?

Brian Gray:

Yeah. Well, the idea starts from, think of the title. If you get a new product of some sort, and it's got a user guide, which is basic constructions for how to utilize or troubleshoot, fill in the blank. So it comes from that idea. But the other source, a friend of mine Banks Benitez, us who was at Uncharted for a while as the CEO, is the one that turned me on the idea at one point over coffee, he stole it from someone else, there's no new ideas under the sun, but it was originally conceived of by a couple of people as a tool that the busy CEO could produce to give to her or his employees to tell them how to maximally interact with her.

Joanna Meyer:

That's a good idea.

Brian Gray:

So that's how it started, which is really wonderful and helpful, but it's not very egalitarian. So I heard it and looked at it and thought, this is one of the most fabulous team conflict tools, and team collaboration tools we could ever imagine. But everybody, it has to be an all play, not just, hey, the busy executive tells other people how to play nice with them. So the idea is that simply a user guide is just, everyone on a team has a number of questions that they're come up with some bullet point responses to about how to interact with them. A user guide to working with, fill in the blank person. This is how you troubleshoot me, this is how you interact with me, this is what helps, et cetera.

Joanna Meyer:

And our user guide covers themes as diverse as your communication style, your preferred pace and work rhythms, how you like to give and receive feedback, how to handle that person if they make a mistake, peeves and frustrations, personality quirks. There's a diverse list, but it's really fascinating. When we did ours here at the institute, I gained a lot of insight about my coworkers, even people I had spent years working alongside. So tell me a little bit about why we developed it.

Brian Gray:

Yeah, it's twofold. There's an old phrase that actually comes out of pre-marital counseling techniques. "All disappointment is rooted in an unmet expectation." So when we talk about this user guide, this is a great tool for work. My gosh, this is a tool for roommates, this could also be a tool for a dating relationship, or a marriage. But the universal concept is all of our disappointment is rooted in an unmet expectation. So why was that an expectation unmet? Was it never communicated? Was it communicated, but unclearly? Was it communicated, but it was unreasonable? "Hey, Joanna, I would like you to bring me lunch every day at the office." Well, this is clearly communicated, but it's totally unreasonable. Was it communicated, and it was clear, and it was reasonable, but it was just misunderstood by the listener? Or was it clearly understood and just totally ignored? Those are just, in examples, five different ways that somebody could be disappointed because of an unmet expectation

Joanna Meyer:

And can have a range of emotional responses to the varying...

Brian Gray:

And then a range of solutions. "Oh, I wasn't clear in what I communicated," is a really different response from, "I was crystal clear. You chose to ignore it because you don't value me." Totally different situation. So the why behind this is just to try to be proactive instead of reactive on conflict. So most people in an office or organizational culture, it's such a huge buzzword. What's your org culture? And people usually are ill-defined in what that means, or it's under defined. But really an organizational culture is simply the values and the practices in which we all do the work that we have as part of our mandate. How do we value these things? What are our attitudes? And what are the practices we bring? And so this is a conflict resolution practice tool so that when we are shaping an organizational culture, it's around, conflict is not a bad thing, conflict is a necessary thing. Let's just do it well, let's do it in a way that's healthy, let's do it in a way that leads to resolution.

And so the why behind a user guide is simply to create a healthy organizational, or team culture, or hey, apply it with your roommates, a household culture, through proactive and healthy conflict. And the truth of it is, while this is a great professional tool, it's a deeply biblical concept. So another part of the why for Christians in particular, though this can be used in a mixed faith and non-faith audience, but Christians, I think, could distinctly pay attention to it because of the mandates over and over in the New Testament around the idea of one another, one another. This is not an abstract idea that care for, and love, and respect of one another, isn't just a fluffy idea, but it gets operationalized. It comes out in the ways we practice, one anothering. Or Roman Swab would say, as far as it depends on you, make every effort to live at peace with one another. This doesn't mean being conflict avoidant, actually. It often means stirring up conflict in a healthy and productive way, so that we can operate and live at peace together.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah. And for our lift listener's sake, I want to circle back around to talk about how you describe conflict, because I tend to be pretty conflict avoidant. And so when I think of conflict, I think of something has gone totally wrong, someone should feel bad, we will step out of the situation. And you probably have never heard me say this, Brian, but we will step out of the situation and have a painful, confrontational conversation to get it resolved. That's not how you see conflict. Tell me how you see conflict.

Brian Gray:

Well, you and I have talked about this before. In fact, I've so enjoyed our working relationship around the discussions of conflict, because we've had a number of them. So I think conflict is simply two people who aren't on the same page. And so this could be as simple as, "Hey, the team's going out for lunch today, Chipotle or Qdoba?" And two of us say one and two of us say another. If you're outside of the Denver metro area and you don't have one of those, just think fast food counter Mexican. So the conflict is we

have four people, two people want to do two different restaurants. This is not that big of a deal, at all, but it is a conflict.

So that's really small scale. But on the larger scale, the reason I think surfacing conflict, maybe it's not the most helpful word, but sometimes I think about my role in leading a meeting is to stir up conflict that might be under the surface that's not getting expressed. Because if it doesn't come out directly in a healthy way, it's going to come out sideways somewhere else. Office gossip, or frustration and bitterness between one person and another. Or anything else that's just a disappointment that somebody feels unseen, unheard, unsupported.

So I think conflict is a really proactive way of collaboration to get on the same page. So conflict to me is totally neutral, it's not negative. It can be done positively and healthily, or it can be done in a really destructive way through passive-aggressive kind of side comments through attack and escalation. There's a lot of negative conflict that can happen.

And the reality is a lot of people have seen, I think your concern around conflict is a really valid one, because let's just name the fact that not many of us, or let's say too few of us, have seen conflict modeled in a healthy way in the homes we grew up in. Or perhaps in the churches or communities of faith we've grown up in. And I'm not being cynical here, I'm just being just truth telling. Or in the workplaces that we've been a part of. So we have toxic conflict environments perhaps in any of those. And so at what point do we learn that passive-aggressive is actually an untruthful way to live? Well, we go right our user guide, we actually get on the front foot and we go start talking about what is really necessary and helpful and direct, and how do we work together and collaborate.

Joanna Meyer:

So yeah, the user guide has been very helpful in a proactive way for me, simply by helping me learn about my coworkers to a level of depth that doesn't always come up in day-to-day conversation around the office, which leads into the question of, how do we use it?

Brian Gray:

Well, first of all, there needs to be a lot of freedom and creativity around this. So this is, to me, I run around and I see a good idea, and I steal liberally despite the 10 commandments. So I steal liberally in a good idea, and then I take it, and I adapt it, and make it work inside of our setting. So the first thing is part of the how is I can give you how we've used it, I can tell you how I've consulted other groups, or individuals to use it in their teams and coaching environments. But everybody needs to feel the freedom to make this work for you and not to be slavish about it. So the way we've used it at Denver Institute is we started as a personnel awareness type of tool.

So let's say there's five of us on the team, I think, when I designed this, and we just said everybody was part of a staff retreat. We're going to get away, we're going to do some intentional time of getting to know one another, and we are going to fill out a user guide and share it with one another. And then just get curious about each other and ask questions and follow up. So we started from that.

So that as a standalone one-off activity is, would be incredibly helpful for people in how to use it. But kind of a next evolution that we came into is, okay, and you'd referred to it earlier, Joanna, when something comes up and people would come and ask me a question, "Hey, I got a question about so-and-so and how to interact with another person on the team," I would say, "Go back. Have you consulted their user guide? Is there anything in there?"

So in other words, it becomes a living document for how I maintain a healthy relationship. And it's not like in a user guide I'm going to cover every single thing. Like, "Hey, when I have too many emails in my email box inbox, this is what I need everyone else to do." It's not going to get that granular. But the first thing is it's not just a one time kind of team bonding activity. It's a like a wiki on each of us, if that makes sense. It's a living document where I can go back and I can add to it, and I can find answers on how to do conflict. But the third evolution for us at Denver Institute is it became a really fun onboarding tool. And this started, I think this started with our podcast producer, Catherine.

So we had to onboard two new staff members during the pandemic using screens entirely, which is to me, a massive violation of human relationship. It was the most horrible thing. So I called three or four of my friends around the country and I said, "Hey, I got to onboard fully remote using screens. What are your best things?" And they all said, "I have no idea, but when you come up with something, tell me." So we just got excited that the user guide would be a really great feature for somebody in week one, fill out the user guide on you right out of the gate, you're going to train us on you, and then we're going to assign to people as an onboarding task to read the user guides of everybody else. And as your organization grows, even as Denver Institute has grown at various times in our size, it can be a little clunky to say, "Hey, all eight of us are going to sit down for three hours and go over user guys." It doesn't work like that, but it can be a great team onboarding tool.

So let's say there's a communications team of three people, and that's actually the case right now at Denver Institute. There's three people who work in communications marketing. If we bring a new person in, that person will walk through their user guide in some and kind of train us, but then the other two people will review and summarize their user guide. So now this team of three has had that relational connection point, and all we're doing is fast tracking collaboration. Collaboration is a fluffy value word, unless we actually do it and do it well and with intentionality. So those are three ways we've used it around here.

Jeff Hoffmeyer:

Hi, I'm Jeff Hoffmeyer, vice president of Advancement here at Denver Institute for Faith and Work. And I'd like to invite you to become a part of our new monthly partner community. Whether it's a monthly commitment of $25, $50, or any amount, your generosity will support Denver Institute's ongoing efforts to help men and women love God, their neighbors and society through their daily work, including this podcast. To say thank you as a monthly partner, you'll receive a welcome box. You'll have exclusive access to private digital content, personalized vocational coaching, and discounts for Denver Institute content and experiences. To become a monthly partner, simply visit denverinstitute.org/give, or see the show notes in today's episode. Thank you in advance for your generosity.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, I think about how it's made a difference for me and my own leadership when we have had interns join the team, I have to find a way to get them up to speed fairly quickly, and into working condition, if that makes sense. And I may have interviewed them, but I really don't know that much about them in a working sense. And so the user guide just helps me figure out, okay, what's the kind of assignment in which they'll succeed? What kind of dialogue do they need to have for me as their director to be able to function well? I also think in my management relationship with Catherine, who's sitting right here, it has helped me to understand how she likes to receive feedback, how she manages their schedule, how she feels about me adjusting or correcting something she's working on. Because Katherine, you do it very differently than I do.

And so it's so helpful for me to look at your user guide and realize like, "Oh, I have the freedom to be more direct with you than I might like people being with me." Or, "You don't mind receiving feedback or correction, you welcome it." And to a degree that I don't like as much. And so that gives me the courage to be able to be like, "Hey, you can be kind and direct with Catherine about this, and it's not going to hurt her feelings." And so it's very helpful. In fact, I need to blow out your user guide again, and just see if there are any tweaks I need to make in my management style.

Brian Gray:

Joanna, you're mentioning two, even in that example, you're mentioning two other great aspects for how to use something like this. And one of them is this is both a management tool for how I manage others, but this is a manage up tool. So this is how we've talked about managing up on a podcast in the future with a couple of our fellows. And so how is it that the person I report to likes to receive feedback? I might want to pay attention to that before I go lab or grenade about all the problems, and the length of our team meetings or the uselessness of them, or why don't we ever have a clear agenda, et cetera. How does that person receive feedback? What's the timing? Is it by email? Is it in person? Is it set them up with an idea, give them time to marinate, come back 48 hours?

And that second piece of how is that each one of us are individuals. And so this gives real honoring to each person made in the image and likeness of God, with their own personalities, and dispositions, and quirks. And for goodness sakes, if you got an Enneagram one, and an Enneagram six, and an Enneagram four in the room, and you know that, you might think differently about the motivations they have. So whether it's this, or any other aspects of Myers-Briggs, or personality tests, or just personality dispositions, when you communicate those types of things on a user guide and people understand them, we actually honor the individual. So this is the great how, this is about making very much of people as individuals in a culture, and not just ubiquitous organizational culture, "This is how we do it, get in line." That's very dishonoring to the individual.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, even things like, there's a question on here, how much time do you need in advance to process a request for new work that you want done? And some people may be able to say like, "Oh, I can get that done for you in two days." Other people may say, "As early as you can get it to me," or even a week. If one of the executives on your team has a heavy workload, they may not have space to squeeze in a new project in their day.

Brian Gray:

And then it changes with different seasons. So let's imagine we're really close to a six-month season of really big production for you around one of our key anchor events. That timeline might shrink to, or I'm sorry, might expand to, "Hey, I need a week or two, and I will tell you if I can get to something that would take more than 10 minutes." And there's other times when, "Hey, here's a quick 10-minute request," I got one yesterday, "Hey, can you do this?" This thing ended up taking me 20 minutes in the office, I had to de-prioritize my own work to prioritize sorting an email list for a colleague. It was important and timely for the work that she was doing, but I had the capacity to do that. If you were to catch me on other days, I was like, I can barely get everything done in between my meetings, so I can't do an off the cuff, "Hey, can you give me a quick 20-minute task?" So it's like air traffic controller work. It just helps direct how we do what we do, but in a really relational setting.

Joanna Meyer:

So I'm going to play devil's advocate for a second. I'm a big believer in the user guide, but I remember one of our interns, who is in mid-career, when she was working for us, thought user guys were the best thing ever. And she took it home to her husband Derek, who leads, he manages a team of male software engineers, and he goes, "My guys would never do this." How would you adapt a tool like this so that it's less touchy-feely? If you're working with a team of people that don't care about the Enneagram, or not in touch with conflict styles, how could this be adapted to suit different organizational cultures?

Brian Gray:

Well, I would say as the son of an engineer, and no offense to Derek's team, I would say that Harvard Business Review for about 20 years has been printing research, finding after research finding, that pedigree of education and hard skills that one brings to the job are very secondary to performance and success predictions, as compared to emotional intelligence and soft skills. Now, that my dad is literally a genius in his work, but works with a bunch of engineers, so this is maybe not the crowd I would anticipate to have in your words these touchy-feely types of things. But this document can be adapted. What we have to do is make it relational. And if that is helping to more deeply understand one another, this is a basic human need. This isn't a personality to disposition, this isn't those of us who are more emotionally oriented versus more thinking types of people. Every human being wants to be understood and to be seen, and this is a tool to help drive that.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, you can easily take out a question or two that might not fit your team.

Brian Gray:

Yeah. It can be adaptable. Or inside of certain organizations, I mean, how many times have you been in a workplace? "Hey, you're going to come on and the first thing out of the gate, we're going to have you take this tool, or this assessment that a coach is going to walk through." And then you're going to know, "Oh, look at that. I'm a green hyphen orange, letter B," or some, I'm mocking a thing...

Joanna Meyer:

I always forget my colors, they stop being useful to me.

Brian Gray:

So what happens if we come back and we have some type of repeatability on whatever that assessment is? And it's just inside your user guide. And we come back and say, what were just simply two or three key walkaways from this team development exercise that we did? Put it in your user guide. And so that you know whether it's the Enneagram, or whether it's something from the disk, what does it mean to be a high eye, and what might that mean to your coworkers? Just two bullet points on something like that. It actually makes them more useful. So I would say that you've got an opportunity to use some very concrete types of assessments like that. You've got some ability to adapt a user guide. Don't be slavish about this, these are some of the questions that we produced on the download that we've used. Make up your own, what's important to your culture.

And it could be to a bunch of people in an engineer setting that they want to really focus some questions on project management process, like some of those technical questions. How early do you need work? If review is going to take longer than 15 minutes, how long do I need to get this to you? What is the best way that I can tell you that your big idea and starting point needs major concern, or your calculations are wrong. You've got to adapt it because this is culture building. And so the person who's in charge of your user guide becomes the carrier and shaper of what culture is, but the actual creation of that culture comes from the bottom up in the values, and the attitudes, and the practices that all employees bring to the workplace. So shape it to the culture you want it to be, this is totally adaptable.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah, and what's cool is that often when we think about an annual performance review, maybe folks listening have been through a season of performance reviews at work, we often look at objective measures like whether persons met their deliverables, or their metrics. We look at the intangibles of how well they live up to the values of the organization. A user guide actually can help shape a performance review too, because you see in a person's natural tendencies, you could spot areas for growth, or it might inform the behavior that you're seeing in their work over the course of a year, and that really can give you language to help you shape something like a performance review.

Brian Gray:

And it's a great response to a performance review. I mean, the example earlier where I can tend to get stressed out of my workload and put my head down, I went and wrote it on my user guide. We have a question of, how will your colleagues know if you are stressed, or anxious? How will they know? So I wrote this down. I wrote the question on the user guide in response to feedback I got on a 360 from one of my colleagues.

And so part of it is that we can start to use, we can integrate those things together so that a review doesn't become this dusty document that you get one time a year and nobody does anything with it. Please read it, your report will send it to you, and then no one does anything with it. That's a total waste of organizational time that drives me bunkers. If I'm not coming back to that throughout the year and thinking about it, and what did my boss say, or what did I say to somebody else, and does it build into a user guide in practices, then it just seems like a real exercise and annual futility, as opposed to a really helpful living guide for what's it look like to create good work, and to do it excellently, and to enjoy what I'm doing.

Joanna Meyer:

I love it. Okay, we're going to give you the final word. It's funny having one of our staff people as a guest, because we often give our guests a chance to have an exhortation encouragement the final word to our listeners. Why would a tool like a user guide enrich human flourishing in the workplace?

Brian Gray:

Yeah, I think whether you're with roommates, or your boyfriend, or people in your book club, or in your workplace, a team you're responsible for, in all those settings, the Christian mandate of love God, and love one another, isn't fluff. It's actually something we can operationalize in very concrete practices. So my encouragement is, take the mandate and the opportunity to be a gift of love to other people through directing one another how to handle conflict in a way that's healthy, and is productive to moving forward in collaboration.

Joanna Meyer:

I love it. So our action point today will be that a free copy of the Denver Institute user guide that is adaptable for your purposes will be available in today's show notes. If you use it, I would love to hear.

Brian Gray:

Oh, please.

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah. You can email us at podcast@denverinstitute.org.

Brian Gray:

Hey, can I add, Joanna?

Joanna Meyer:

Yeah.

Brian Gray:

If people come up with better questions, remember, we steal liberally around here. So whatever questions people come up with on the user guide, if they put it into play, if they find them to be real fruitful, shoot them back and let us know, and we'll keep adapting this so that we can kind of help grow fruit on one another's trees in different organizations.

Joanna Meyer:

I love it. Yep. That's podcast@denverinstitute.org. Brian, thanks for your time, and also for your cultural leadership in this way.

Brian Gray:

Good to be here.

Joanna Meyer:

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