**Steward Leadership in Today’s Nonprofit Organization**

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Steward leadership, one of four biblical leadership models identified by Robert Clinton (1989), is the most comprehensive yet least developed leadership model for nonprofit leaders today.

**The Classical Steward**

* A steward is one who faithfully and efficiently manages the property or resources belonging to another in order to achieve the owner’s objectives.
* Stewards existed as far back as ancient Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Jewish history.
* Stewards were slaves that were trained from an early age to oversee the rural farm, large households, businesses, financial affairs, and even civic duties.
* Common words for the steward:
  + Hebrew *‘al habbayit* (from *‘al*, over, and *bayit*, house), one who oversees the affairs of a household, an important official of the state
  + Greek *oikonomos*, from *oikos* (house, household) and *nemo* (to distribute, manage), one who manages or administrates a household and its affairs, a state official
  + Latin *villicus,* the farm overseer or steward
* Stewards were expected to practice management techniques that were a precursor of modern management practice (for manuals written on the steward’s duties see Xenophon Oeconomicus, and Columella On Agriculture)
  + - Always learning
    - Trained for management
    - Knows what the master/owner knows
    - Manages resources for maximum efficiency and growth
    - Does not expect subordinates to serve him
    - Demonstrates by example how a job is to be done
    - Rewards good workers

**The Bible Provides Additional Understanding of the Steward’s Role**

* God is affirmed as the ultimate owner of all things (Ps. 24:1, Deut. 8:10-18)
* People are God’s representatives (imago dei) who manage His creation and spiritual resources (Genesis 1:28-30, 1 Peter 4:10)
* Faithfulness in stewardship will be rewarded with greater responsibilities and resources
* Stewards exhibited a new kind of leadership that serves (modeled by Jesus, Matthew 20:25-28)
* The relationship between the owner and steward is critical to effective stewardship
* Joseph, the Apostle Paul, and ultimately Jesus are our models of steward-leadership

The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30 & Luke 19:11-27)

* Resources are given to us in varying amounts based on the master’s choice and our faithfulness
* The primary purpose of stewardship is to grow the resources (“put them to work,” “conduct business,” “make profit”)
* Managing risk is a natural and expected part of a steward’s responsibility)
* A steward is most effective if he/she focuses on the rights and goals of the master…not on what he personally wants to accomplish
* Masters and stewards experience a reciprocal relationship of mutual understanding and mutual participation in the rewards
* Stewards are accountable for their actions and results

**Other Important Passages Concerning Steward Leadership**

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| --- | --- |
| Genesis 39, 41 (Joseph)  Luke 12:42-48 (Faithful steward)  Luke 13:6-9 (Unfruitful fig tree) | Luke 16:1-13 (Shrewd steward)  Ephesians 3:2-9 (Stewardship of God’s grace) |

**Important Definitions**

**Stewardship**: *The faithful and efficient management of the property or resources belonging to another in order to achieve the owner’s objectives*.

**Steward Leadership**: *To manage the efficient use and growth of organizational resources, and to lead the staff and activities of the organization as a steward, in order to achieve the mission according to the objectives of the owners and stakeholders.*

**The Resources We Manage**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Money  People/employees  Personal gifts, talents, abilities  Time  Products and services  Our children | The earth/environment  Our bodies  Our calling/the organizational mission  The Gospel  The church (God’s house) |

**Who Are The “Owners” of the Resources We Steward?**

* God
* Stakeholders, or implicit owners (a person who affects or has a stake in an organization such as nonprofit donors, customers, employees, or the community)

Therefore, anyone who is leading a nonprofit organization is a steward.

*Who are the stakeholders of the resources you are stewarding in your organization?*

**The Developing Stages of Steward Leadership**

1. **Stewardship as accounting**: “At the moment you have 40 goats.” No attempt is made at growing the resources but only at giving the owner an accurate count of what he owns at the moment.
2. **Stewardship as sustainability**: “Last year you gave me 40 goats to care for. I have fed them and kept them healthy, so you still have 40 goats.” Sustaining or conserving the resources in perpetuity is the primary goal (custodial care).
3. **Stewardship as growth**: “Last year you gave me 40 goats, and I have increased the herd to 60 goats.” Growing the resources was the responsibility of each of the stewards in the parable of the talents (“put this money to work”, Lk. 19:13).
4. **Stewardship as optimization**: “Last year you gave me 40 goats, and I have increased the size of the herd to 60 goats, but I also sold 10 goats and that money might better be reinvested in buying a cow this year.” The master expects the steward to strategically manage the resources for maximum ROI (or converted to other applications).

*At what stage of stewardship are you personally leading your company or organization?*

**The Difference Between Servant Leadership & Steward Leadership**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Servant**  **Leadership** | **Steward**  **Leadership** |
| **Core identity** | Servant | Steward |
| **Motivation for leadership** | Altruism (selfless pursuit of the interests of others) | Responsibility to the stakeholders, altruism, personal fulfillment |
| **Characteristics** | Service, selflessness, empowering others | The same plus accountability, faithfulness, knows the master (relationship), mission-focused, non-ownership, and acts with delegated authority |
| **Primary Action** | Serve people's highest priority needs  “Servant first, leader second” | Lead the organization to accomplish the desires and objectives of stakeholders.  Leverage and grow the resources |
| **Goal of leadership** | Empowered followers | Fulfilled mission  Sustainable organization |

The steward leadership model uniquely addresses: impact of non-ownership on leadership, resource management, relationship with stakeholders, stakeholder accountability, and fiduciary accountability.

**The Implications of Steward Leadership in Today’s Nonprofit Organization**

The “chain of stewardship” in the nonprofit organization:

Implicit owners (Stakeholders)

Board of Directors (Steward)

Executive Director (Under-Steward)

Staff (under-stewards)

Steward leaders…

1. Recognize that they are not owners, but only trustees of the resources belonging to another
2. Know *who* they are accountable to and *what* they are accountable for
3. Maintain close relationships with the owner(s) of the resources in order to know the owner’s goals and intentions
4. Manage resources for maximum efficiency and growth
5. Develop employees who view themselves as stewards too (under-stewards)
6. Live as servants to others
7. Are comfortable with the risks associated with growing and investing resources
8. Manage a wide range of resources (things, skills, people, money, environment, etc.
9. Lead with delegated authority along with a latitude of freedom in decision-making
10. Expect greater responsibilities and resources as they faithfully carry out their stewardship
11. Redirect resources when necessary to maximize return-on-investment
12. Are allowed to maintain a reasonable personal standard of living from the resources
13. Lead out of character, not competence
14. Experience joy and fulfillment in their work as stewards

**Questions for Today’s Steward Leaders**

How well do you understand your role as a steward leader?

What kind of ongoing relationship are you developing with the owner(s) of the resources you manage? (With God? Stakeholders?)

At what stage of stewardship are you leading? (Accounting? Sustainability? Growth? Optimization?)

What would God say to you about how you have managed His resources?

How are you helping others to be stewards as well? (Peers? Employees? Those you disciple?)

**Recommended Reading**

Brattgard, Helge. God’s Stewards: A Theological Study of the Principles and Practices of Stewardship.

Brinckerhoff, Peter C. Nonprofit Stewardship: A Better Way to Lead Your Mission-Based Organization.

Hall, Douglas John. The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*.*

Rodin, R. Scott. Stewards In the Kingdom: A Theology of Life in all its Fullness.

---. The Steward Leader: Transforming People, Organizations and Communities.

Wilson, Kent R. “Steward Leadership: Characteristics of the Steward Leader in Christian Nonprofit Organizations.” (PhD dissertation)