**What Is a Steward Leader?**

By Kent R. Wilson, PhD

© March 2013

Steward leaders have their roots as far back as in ancient Greece, Rome, and Israel, where stewards ran most of the commercial enterprises, estates, farms, and even political services. They were given considerable latitude and freedom to manage the business or estate with the trust and confidence of the owner. A steward leader is *someone who manages the efficient use and growth of organizational resources, and leads the staff and activities of the organization as a steward, in order to achieve the mission according to the objectives of the owners or stakeholders*.

In your role as a steward leader in a nonprofit organization, you lead with a different mindset than an owner-operator. You know that you are there to lead the organization to accomplish its mission for the benefit of the stakeholders: the donors, constituents, and community. You are able to personally benefit from the results of your good leadership, but your first concern is the value you are bringing to the “owners” as a result of your leadership. Leading like a steward involves a number of unique attributes, behaviors, and perspectives:

1. **The steward leader knows the mind of the owner**

When an owner, stockholder, stakeholder, or community entrusts an enterprise into the hands of a steward leader, they expect the steward to manage the business or organization as if they were running it themselves. One of the early distinguishing characteristics of the classical steward was said to be “The steward knows what the owner knows.” The steward needs to know the owner’s desires and goals for the resources and then manage accordingly.

1. **The steward leader is accountable**

Since the steward leads and manages resources on behalf of others, the steward is accountable to the owner, stockholders, or stakeholders for how he or she has managed the enterprise. In the modern corporation, financial accounting is one of the main ways that stewards account for their stewardship. In the nonprofit organization, accountability is measured through the accomplishments of the mission and outcomes as well as fiduciary accountability.

1. **The steward leader serves**

Classical stewards were generally slaves, albeit the highest ranking slave. In our modern society, the steward leader is owned by no one, but he or she is still a servant of the owner(s) and leads with an attitude of service and altruism for the benefit of others.

1. **The steward leader stewards a wide range of resources**

Enterprise stewards do more than just try to make businesses grow. They also steward and grow their own personal skills and abilities, the company’s brand and reputation, the work environment and culture, the skills and abilities of others, etc. It’s a highly responsible position with wide-ranging resources and responsibilities.

1. **The steward leader develops stewardship in others**

Finally, steward leaders don’t try to do it alone. They develop stewardship in the employees so that together everyone can manage the resources of the enterprise with the same mindset and goals. Steward leadership is one of the oldest, and most contemporary, leadership models around.

*Kent Wilson (PhD) is a leadership coach and nonprofit leadership specialist. After running nonprofit organizations for 30 years, he now serves as an executive coach with Vistage International and the Nonprofit Leadership Exchange in Colorado Springs. He can be reached at kent.wilson@vistage.com.*