Steward Leaders Are United with the People They Serve

In this trajectory I ask the question, "How would steward leaders serve their people at this first level?"

Everything I have said about the steward leader in the presence of God leads me to this one conclusion: steward leaders are free: to be united with the people they serve in a mutual journey of faith and discovery.

As we undergo the transformation of our own heart in our response to the call to be a godly steward, we become leaders who are passionate about the hearts of our people. We create new ways of setting priorities for leadership that impact the goals for our people and, through them, our organization. As a result, our people are enabled to attain the richest expression of their God-given talents and empowered to live to the fullest their unique vocation.

As steward leaders we can do this only because we ourselves have been set free. In this freedom, we can look beyond our personal needs and genuinely care about the spiritual well-being of our people. When I have real intimacy with God, I also have a huge capacity to want the same for the people I lead. If I live in the shallows, I have neither the security in my relationship with God nor the spiritual maturity to provide genuine spiritual leadership to my people.

Too many leaders are operating in the spiritual shallows, and they are performing publicly while privately competing with the people they are called to serve.

Steward leaders invite their people to join them in deeper waters. They yearn for every colleague to take his or her own next deeper step in relationship with Christ. And they are not threatened when they look out and find a coworker who has ventured even further than they. In fact, they are free to rejoice. This is real freedom, to have confidence in the depths into which God has called you, to urge

others to go deeper with you and to rejoice when some find even deeper waters than your own.

However, it is not enough simply to desire this growth for your people. The steward leader must assemble the systems and shape the culture that will encourage and support such a process. You cannot say you are committed to a mutual journey of faith and discovery if your systems penalize people for time committed to spiritual disciplines and your culture rewards only doing-driven behavior. Systems and culture will ultimately prevail, and so they must be changed to support the goals of the steward leader.

It might rightly be asked what impact such changes might have on the measurable outcomes and financial bottom line of a ministry, church or business. Is this steward leader approach just wishful thinking that falls apart in the "real world"?

Let me offer two responses. First, steward leaders have only one calling: obedient response to the call of God. If that response is to care about and be committed to the well-being of the people they lead, they will trust God for the outcomes. For the owner-leader, such a thought is impossible to imagine. Tied to the outward success of the organization, owner-leaders default to the most expedient way to achieve their own definition of success. If people grow along the way, that is an unexpected blessing. The owner-leader has tied his or her success to that of the organization and is in bondage to that success. For this leader, it would be unthinkable to risk the outward accomplishment of the organization for some less tangible goal like the spiritual growth of its people. The steward leader, however, seeks only to be obedient to Christ, which always puts him or her in a kingdom mindset. When we look at the

This brings us to my second answer: the kingdom of God *is* the real world. Since when did following God's leading with absolute obedience come into conflict with the goals of a Christian organization? Yet, when steward leaders lift up the spiritual well-being of their people as a primary goal of the ministry, many raise the concern that such actions will divert attention from the mission of the organization-as if developing a community of men and women more deeply in love with Jesus would prove a bad investment of time for a ministry whose mission is to serve in Jesus' name!

Steward leaders must constantly hold a kingdom view, and they can do this because they enjoy intimacy with God. They must lead others according to this kingdom view, and they can do this because they are free.

Steward Leaders Cultivate Culture

When the participants in an organization undergo personal transformation in their relationship with God, a new culture emerges. The steward leader looks for, creates, nourishes and protects this emerging culture as the foundation for the transformation of the business or ministry. This culture is a product of free people working together to glorify God. It is the opposite of a culture of control in which people work to complete tasks like parts in a machine.

One result of this freedom is a constructive culture where people look first to work in teams rather than retreat to silos. [***Workplace silos are isolated groups or departments that function independently and avoid sharing information with others***.]

They [Teams] create an atmosphere where team members wrestle in discussions to discover productive solutions that are possible only when the best from each team

member is joined together into a solid decision. In such a culture there is no place for a watered-down consensus to keep everyone happy; rather, vigorous debate thrives in the "iron sharpens iron" environment (Proverbs 27:17).

Steward leaders recognize the strength of a positive culture and its impact on organizational effectiveness. They encourage their team to set challenging goals, bold goals that raise the standard and lead to significant performance improvements. Teams shaped by this culture become willing to shake up their comfort zones as they focus on results. Freedom begets freedom!

A culture can either inhibit productivity or maximize it if left to chance, cultures decline instead of improve. If a culture is to be transformed, the leader must set the pace. Steward leaders lift those around them by their direct interaction and management, but also and most importantly by their example. Bill Robinson describes what he calls "grace-filled" leadership and its impact on culture:

> "Grace-filled leadership releases not only warmth but also energy into an organizational culture. Energy dissipates in a climate of fear. Mistakes are too costly. As we think about organizational culture in our ministries and organizations, we need to ask ourselves what kind of culture we're creating."

Such grace-filled leadership creates a culture of trust and confidence. Steward leaders offer grace, and as they do, they cultivate a culture of grace that returns to them. It is in offering grace that we discover one of the most reliable and powerful leadership principles: *you get what you give.* When we trust, we are trusted. When we doubt, we are doubted. When we give the benefit of the doubt, we receive the benefit of doubt. Grace circles back to bless the leader. Over time, being filled with grace fills others with grace.

For a steward leader to build a sustainable organization that performs far beyond its capabilities, culture is the bed of white-hot embers that keeps the flames burning. Jesus created an environment in which his disciples could follow

him and discover the heart of God the Father. There were no mandatory meetings, no demands for higher productivity or threats for bad behavior. Instead, Jesus answered questions with parables and had patience with, and full acceptance of, those who would eventually lead the building of God's church. Jesus created a culture where people could rise beyond their situation and enter into a journey with eternal value. He was grace-filled in his words and actions.

For owner-leaders who seek control, culture will always be a struggle. A strong, controlling personality may be able to shape culture initially, but it cannot be maintained by one person for long. Culture, by its very definition, involves a community. If a leader is threatened by the loss of control, the challenge of shaping culture will devour him or her. Only in the freedom of a steward leader can a community be set free to form a culture that serves the mission and glorifies the real owner. Steward leaders seek to help shape culture, but they have no need to control it. If, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, culture is shaped in a different way than the steward leader may have desired, there is grace to accept the change and lead onward.

Culture is also both a reflection of personality and rises above it. This brings us back to the importance of our response of joyful obedience. Because leaders influence the culture of the organizations they lead, steward leaders seek to create a free and obedient culture that is a reflection of their own freedom in Christ and obedience to his calling. If we believe that somehow our organization's culture is not impacted by our own behavior and values, we are either irresponsible or naive.

To help us think about the impact of the leader on culture, consider the concept of fractals, which Margaret Wheatley uses to help us understand organizational culture. Fractals are complex structures that originate in

simplicity. One example is a fern, which appears to be a complex structure, of countless shapes and patterns woven together to form its intricate and beautiful leaves. Yet the entire structure can be simplified to a basic four-line pattern that is simply repeated in various directions and sizes. Many highly complex structures in the natural world can be simplified in a similar way to a basic fractal pattern. Wheatley writes, "All fractal patterns are created as individuals exercise both freedom and responsibility from which simple rules develop. Complex structures emerge over time from simple elements and rules, and independent interactions."

Just as the most complex physical structures are composed of simple fractals repeated within the confines of a basic set of rules, so are organizations. Culture is formed from repeated patterns of behavior. Leaders serve the organization like a fractal, setting the pattern through their values and behaviors, and through the extent to which they bring consistent alignment of the organizational vision with every aspect of the organization's work. As these patterns are set, and as people are allowed the freedom to repeat and build and expand on them, culture is born.

This same freedom keeps the steward leader from playing the owner. The freedom of the steward leader provides freedom for an organization to develop its culture. That is, although the fractal pattern is set, the way that pattern is expanded, duplicated, built on and arranged within the organization is the result of free people interacting in community. Wheatley writes, "Fractal order originates when a simple formula is fed back on itself in a complex network. And in true fractal fashion, these vital agreements do not restrict individuals from embodying them in diverse and unique ways."

Steward leaders develop and nurture culture not by controlling information or

manipulating perspective, but by modeling the heart of the steward leader and being free to allow it to be repeated throughout the organization. The potent force that shapes behavior in these organizations and in all natural systems is the combination of simply expressed expectations of purpose, intent and values, and *the freedom for responsible individuals to make sense of these in their own way*.

Such an aim requires a leader to be free in her relationship to her job, her people and the vision of the organization, and to allow people to act freely as they develop culture.

If leaders serve like fractals to give shape and pattern to the culture of their organization, they must also understand that the culture transcends their leadership. We inherit culture wherever we go, and we leave it behind when we depart. If we are free in relationship to our organization and the culture we help shape, we must be able to walk away and allow the culture to change and reform under new leadership. Too many leaders cannot let go because, in part, they believe that the culture they have helped develop could not exist without them.

This is nothing more than ownership and bondage dressed up in the appearance of caring about the organization. While the leader may shape the culture, it is maintained, nurtured, developed, adjusted, amended and reformed by the community. In all of these ways culture transcends any one particular leader, and we need to be free from it in order to let that happen when it must. If we do not own the culture, we can allow it to be passed on to the next person God calls to lead. And when we look back and see that the culture we helped shape has changed under different Leadership under a new fractal pattern we can rejoice in what God is doing.

Steward leaders who are truly free will neither underestimate the impact their behaviors and values have on shaping culture nor overestimate their own

==importance to its preservation and development after they leave.== This is an important balance to maintain if we are to be stewards of our organizations at this first level.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Growth

1. Do you understand and appreciate the role you play in shaping and maintaining the culture of your organization?

2. What kind of fractal pattern are you modeling, and how is it being repeated throughout your community?

3. Is your community free to shape its culture according to the way God is leading it?

4. Where are you giving in to the temptation to play the owner-leader?

5. Where do you need to ask for forgiveness from your people?

6. What is your next step as a steward leader in modeling the kind of freedom and joyful obedience on which your organization can develop a culture that glorifies God and builds the kingdom?