

Steward Leaders Harness the Power of People

As the people we lead find greater balance in their self-understanding and unique calling, the organization as an organic system realizes an increase in organizational effectiveness, quality of work and employee satisfaction and retention. People are ready to perform at new levels of effectiveness when they have been set free to see themselves as God sees them. When prideful people find balance in godly humility and people with low self-esteem begin to understand who they really are as children of God, they are on a journey of transformation. The fruits of that journey are improved vocational performance, deeper levels of satisfaction and a desire for excellence.

Steward leaders help their people harness the energy that flows from this greater sense of balance and freedom. They not only help create the culture in which it can thrive but also provide the catalyst for its growth. When people are free, they want to work at a new level and achieve higher goals than before. Steward leaders lead the community to that higher place. Nothing can frustrate a person more than to have been set free to work as a godly steward, only to be forced to continue to work in an old system of bondage and ownership.

By harnessing the power of people, I mean creating systems that encourage and challenge people to perform at the highest level possible as an expression of their newfound freedom. Such systems involve ***listening, agility and obedience.***

Listening.

Steward leaders develop a culture that values the time, energy and discipline needed for listening carefully to those voices that can best guide and inform the organization toward achieving its goals. This starts with a passion for listening to God, which happens in a variety of ways across a broad range of institutional cultures. But

it must happen diligently, frequently and visibly. Steward leaders develop systems that depend on the discipline of listening to the voice of God through Scripture, prayer, worship and community sharing, to name a few. It is done proactively and intentionally. It is not enough to ask everyone to "be in prayer" over certain issues. If we are to create a culture of listening, we must develop systems that bear witness to the value we place on listening. When people are freed from constantly listening to themselves, they are ready, as a community, to listen more carefully for the voice of God in their midst.

This listening broadens to include other voices that are critical for missional success, that is, listening to one another. We have more intelligence, creativity and insight right in our own people than we ever seek to use. As people are set free in themselves, they are better prepared to be positive, creative and innovative voices in our community. Steward leaders encourage this, and the community serves as an incubator of ideas and innovation.

Listening may also include outside voices. Here is where the freedom of steward leaders is critical. They do not shy away from allowing outside voices of expertise and knowledge to be heard in the community. They are free to welcome the outside voices of consultants, colleagues from other organizations in your industry or conference speakers into your listening culture.

An actively listening community has the best chance of learning about best practices and evaluating its own work in light of them. It can see itself in a more realistic and honest way. It encourages creativity and rewards innovative thinking and personal expression. It is an extension of freedom, and it nurtures the journey of transformation that unites the steward leader with everyone he or she is privileged to serve.

Agility,

(the ability to adapt to new information in a time frame that allows the change to be effective)

Listening alone, however, is not enough. In fact, it can lead to frustration if people feel listened to, but nothing happens as a result. For that reason, harnessing the power of people who have been set free must involve the creation of organizational *agility*. Again, this looks different for every organization. However, one common characteristic is the ability to adapt to new information in a time frame that allows the change to be effective. That is, are doing more scenario or situation planning and creating more-flexible three-year plans that require ongoing listening and have built-in mechanisms for evaluation and adjustment.

Such planning enables an organization to cast a vision for its future with confidence and to freely pursue adjustments along the way. Owner-leaders like control and predictability. Change comes hard, and agility is not a valued characteristic in the owner-leader's organizational culture. They hang on to what is known and can be controlled, manipulated and confined. Lacking their own personal freedom, they cannot lead others in developing cultural agility.

When set free, to live and work in a balanced self understanding, people carry that personal freedom into a culture that can embrace a greater level of agility. And steward leaders harness that energy, empowering and encouraging their people to develop the kind of organizational agility that serves the kingdom of a God who invites us to follow him on a journey, not to exist at a destination.

Obedience.

A final step is required in this process. An organization must not only listen and be agile enough to respond, but it must take also the final step and actually **obey** with its actions. I have seen healthy organizations listen carefully to the right voices, prepare their people for dynamic change and lead them to the edge of the new frontier, only to shrink back at the last moment and retreat to familiar territory. It takes great courage to lead an organization through a systemic change of any kind. There are unseen risks and a lot of interpersonal dynamics at work, constantly encouraging things to remain the same. Even a free and empowered community faces obstacles when trying to be obedient to implement significant change.

A leader must be armed with confidence that the path the organization has chosen to travel is God's intention (listening); that it has been well thought out and vetted with the best expertise available (listening); that the community has been prepared to make this journey (agility); that each person sees his place, and role within that journey (agility); and that the motivation for the journey is absolute obedience. As they lead, they do not stop listening and responding. In fact, listening and responding with agility are signs of ongoing obedience. A cyclical, dynamic process reinforces the drive to obedience while it reshapes the form it will take.

Steward leaders harness the energy of a people set free, through this dynamic process of listening, developing agility and responding obediently.

There is no formula for how this looks in any given situation. It is a wholly Spirit-led process. These are just the contours of this trajectory of harnessing the power of your people. How it works in your organization under your leadership will be determined by your own process of listening, developing agility and responding obediently. Your job is not to know how everything will work itself out, but to lead your people in freedom that will result in joyful obedience.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Growth

1. Are you developing a listening culture in your organization?
2. Are you open to listening to all voices speaking into your community? Are you freely empowering your people to create organizational agility? *
3. Are you obedient to God's calling to reshape and change your organization as he leads it on its journey?
4. How are you harnessing the energy and power of your people as they are being set free to serve?
 - It should be understood that outside voices are speaking a language that supports a godly perspective. There is lots of “advice” out there that does not.