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What Stewards Do



Stewards bring considerable skills, knowledge and experience to their roles, yet they also possess the humility to know what they don't know, not to mention what they *don't know they don't know*.

There is an ongoing and robust discussion of leadership, particularly in organizational contexts, that is very present in our lives today. The business press regularly publishes in-depth profiles of (mostly) corporate executives in which they reveal their leadership philosophies, share war stories and dispense words of wisdom. Each year, universities, consultancies and other influencers create a plethora of leadership-specific content, including books, videos and training sessions designed to teach “winning” leadership strategies, effective leadership development approaches or both. Social media platforms help amplify and spread the common message that connects each of these resources to all the others: *outstanding leadership is the key ingredient in creating successful organizations*.

Associations, of course, are not exempt from our society's profound interest with leadership. Most associations have either formal or informal “leadership ladders” that interested stakeholders are expected to climb over a period of years to find their way from new member to regular participant to senior decision-maker. In addition, many associations conduct organized leadership development opportunities designed to help voluntary contributors learn the skills and adopt the behaviors necessary to function as leaders inside their organizations.

At this crucial moment in their history, however, associations will be better served by traveling a different path toward the future: *making the affirmative choice to focus their attention on nurturing stewards and realizing the beneficial effects of stewardship*. With societal transformation getting faster, deeper and more intense, growing in complexity and its implications and consequences becoming more visible and tangible with each passing day, associations must harness a full measure of the energy, intelligence and passion available from their contributors to create a distinctive and more vibrant future. This is the fundamental work of stewardship.

Stewardship is a shared commitment on the part of the stewards to work with their stakeholders to create systems, including communities, networks and organizations, that can thrive, even though they are not their owners. By definition, stewards put the good of the whole ahead of their own interests. In addition, stewards recognize that confronting the novel challenges created by societal transformation, as well as capitalizing on the emerging opportunities it affords, requires a superior level of both individual performance and collective effort. To meet these demands, stewards model certain ways of thinking and acting that can help unify all contributors in common purpose.

Stewards Listen in Moments

Stewardship begins with the recognition by stewards that they must listen closely to the stakeholders they serve. Every stakeholder interaction offers the chance to unlock the immense power of serendipity, a unique opportunity to listen with both head and heart for creative ideas and actionable insights that can redefine *what is* and inspire



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new thinking about *what is possible*. For stewards, listening in moments is about building a richly empathic understanding of what matters most to stakeholders that can be brought to bear on the challenge of shaping truly thrivable systems designed to operate for the stakeholders' shared benefit.

Stewards Learn in Days

If every moment is a chance for stewards to listen, then every day is an opportunity for them to learn. Stewards bring considerable skills, knowledge and experience to their roles, yet they also possess the humility to *know what they don't know*, not to mention what they *don't know they don't know*. Stewards ask serious and thought-provoking questions of themselves and others daily and, if they don't have helpful answers, they are motivated to seek them out, permitting curiosity to animate and guide the discovery process. This dedication to sustained learning sets a powerful example that can be a source of inspiration for other contributors as well.

Stewards Anticipate in Months

The uncertainty created by societal transformation can leave some association decision-makers feeling extremely risk averse and personally vulnerable. Stewards can manage their risk concerns and explore feelings of vulnerability through the work of foresight. By establishing an always-shifting 84-month "foresight horizon" (that is the 84 months beyond an 18-36 month "strategy window" within which the specific priority is stakeholder value creation), stewards can focus their collective attention on anticipating a full range of plausible futures for both their systems and stakeholders. Through close collaboration to make sense, make meaning and make decisions, stewards can build on their own learning, fulfill the duty of foresight and engage in honest dialogue about the potential implications of their shared inquiry, including any deeply-felt personal or professional concerns. Foresight is a fundamental act of stewardship, one that is constantly repeated and endures over time. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to conceive of genuine stewardship in the absence of foresight.

Stewards Prepare in Years

Associations are accustomed to marking the passage of time by organizing their activities in yearly increments, including fiscal years, membership years and program years. For stewards, every year offers a fresh opportunity to use the work of governing to strengthen the thrivability of the systems for which they are responsible. In this context, governing is an intentional and dynamic process for enabling the coherence, capability and continuity of the system. Through their work, stewards must ensure the system understands its reasons for being and the outcomes it intends to achieve (coherence), can take effective action to make progress toward achieving those outcomes (capability) and can thrive even as it confronts the disruptive impact of societal transformation (continuity). Although these governing responsibilities belong primarily to the stewards, they can and should be shared with all stakeholders who are ready to make positive contributions to stewardship.

Stewards Act in Decades

Many association decision-makers struggle with taking the long view, especially in the face of what can be significant short-term pressures. For stewards, however, the cumulative effect of listening in moments, learning in days, anticipating in months and preparing in years makes it quite natural to adopt a long-term perspective on their stewardship, and with a specific concern for their successors in mind. Stewards understand their unique and solemn obligations to those who will succeed them years or decades from now. Without knowing it yet, those successors are counting on their predecessors, i.e., the current stewards, to take actions today that will help position both their systems and stakeholders for thrivability at the time the successors assume their stewardship responsibilities.

If associations want to follow this article's advice and make the affirmative choice to focus their attention on nurturing stewards and realizing the beneficial effects of stewardship, how should they begin?

There are three immediate steps that associations can undertake. First, staff and voluntary decision-makers should examine their orthodox beliefs around leadership with great care. What assumptions are they making about the value of leadership vs. stewardship, and are those assumptions true and helpful? A forthright and thoughtful conversation about the extent to which leadership orthodoxy shapes the thinking of the association's most influential contributors is essential. Second, directors should reflect on the original reasons they were first moved to seek out board service. Are they at the table to serve their own interests or are they passionate about advancing a larger purpose for the primary benefit of others? Once again, this dialogue must be honest and productive. Finally, directors must want to open themselves to the possibilities of stewardship and fully embrace the idea of being nurtured to do what stewards do. Doing so will raise the expectations for their performance over time, and that can only be a good thing for 21st century associations.

To advance confidently into the future, associations need more stewardship and less leadership. While this assertion may seem counterintuitive and difficult for some association decision-makers to accept, it would be a mistake to reflexively reject it. Instead, they should seriously consider whether the systems and stakeholders for which they are responsible are truly capable of thriving in a world experiencing transformation. Regardless of the current answer, the work of stewardship is certain to move their associations closer to where they need to be to achieve their most important outcomes, especially serving their stakeholders. Now is the right time to listen, to learn, to anticipate, to prepare and to act. The big question is whether associations, and their decision-makers, are ready to accept this considerable challenge.

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