



## SERVANT AND STEWARD: THE STEWARD LEADER MODEL FOR UNLEASHING HUMAN POTENTIAL

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The mandate for business leaders to consistently predict and achieve economic success reverberates throughout American society. Many leaders who wish to practice transformational leadership are faced with the dilemma of implementing command and control, productivity driven leadership techniques to achieve bottom-line results. These management practices were developed during a time when the workplace was perceived as a place of cause and effect, action and reaction. The ideal employee was one whose actions matched the consistency and reliability of a machine. This focus on Frederick Taylor's management techniques, in the workplace and in many MBA programs, may in fact undermine the economic success of organizations. The opportunities for American businesses in the 21st century have to do with developing our greatest assets, which are our emotional intelligence and our ability to take responsibility and make innovative decisions. The author of this article believes that a deeper examination of the steward leader model offers business leaders an opportunity to integrate transformational leadership values with economic values in an organization's operating model. The approach is centered on the concept of stewardship. In this article, the author outlines the elements of a steward leader model that emerged as a result of conducting a review of the literature and an informal field interview with a steward leader.



## INTRODUCTION

Various authors, scholars, business leaders, and consultants have explored the concepts related to the steward leader role in the business workplace. As American business systems become more impacted by and connected to the global economy, the steward leader model may be one of the best ways in which a leader can practice relational leadership values and achieve economic success in the business environment (Block, 1993).

Letting go of old paradigms that view the natural world and social capital as resources that exist to serve as financial and productive capital is often more difficult than one might think. The steward leader model provides some direction as to how business leaders might be able to release the old and embrace the new paradigms of stewardship in the 21st century. Yet there are many challenges associated with implementing leadership models of stewardship that include trust, accountability, responsibility, and the distribution of power. First the “what is stewardship and what is the steward leader model” questions arise. Second, the challenges associated with “how to implement a stewardship model” have to be addressed. In this article, I suggest that the steward leader model is one form of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is centered on self-actualization, selflessness and commitment to what Fowler (1981) called a dedication to a “universal community.” One of the significant components of transformational leadership is the leader’s ability to release human potential for the collective pursuit of common goals (Fairholm, 1994). I take the stance that transformational leaders are community builders, balancing and counterbalancing the needs of each employee with the needs of the organizational community and the world community. These leaders are stewards of their organizations and of the hopes of their stakeholders.

In this article, I first address the “what is stewardship” question. Moving to the issue of the challenges related to creating a sustainable legacy of stewardship, I explore how one business leader has implemented a steward leadership model. This discussion with a business leader was conducted as



part of informal field interviews concerning the steward leader model. I discuss the learning that emerged as a result of the literature review and field interview. This learning provides specific guidelines for individuals who wish to explore a steward leader model as a component of their transformational leadership. This article concludes with questions for further reflection and dialogue among leaders.

#### DISCUSSION OF WHAT STEWARDSHIP IS

In this section, I investigate a definition of stewardship in the workplace presented by authors, scholars, and business leaders and consultants who have explored the concepts related to the role of the steward leader in the workplace. I review the old paradigms that leaders must release if they wish to embrace the new paradigms of transformational leadership.

The concept of stewardship is as old as the Bible. In the Bible, there are many references regarding the trust that is bestowed upon humanity to care for the world and all that is contained within it; to develop our talents and treasure with a purpose; to be responsible for our lives. For example: “If God has been generous with you, He will expect you to serve Him well” (Luke 12:48) or “Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Peter 4:9-10).

Trust, sustainability, responsibility, accountability have always been associated with the concept of stewardship. Similarly, the concept of trusteeship has also been coupled with stewardship—that is, the idea that ownership is temporarily in our hands and our role as trustee or steward is for a temporary period in time. In the old paradigm, stewardship was a concept that was primarily linked with the Bible and religious institutions. The steward leader in the workplace model embraces these same values of trust, responsibility, accountability, and empowerment. In the paradigm of the New Economy and the post-industrial age, stewardship is a concept that is linked to forward-thinking leadership, spirituality, and community in the workplace. One of the key components of the steward leader model in the



workplace is the way in which the leader shares equally all power so that followers become one, united around the leader's vision (Fairholm, 1997).

Most management consultants, organizational leadership researchers, and sociologists offer similar definitions (Block, 1993; Fairholm, 1997; Greenleaf, 1977; Lewin and Birute, 2000; Marcic, 1997; Etzioni, 1993; Senge and Carstedt, 2001). Block further clarifies the definition of stewardship, bringing the issues related to governance, ownership, responsibility and business results to the fore.

Stewardship is the set of principles and practices which have the potential to make dramatic changes in our governance system. It is concerned with creating a way of governing ourselves that creates a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for our outcomes at the bottom of the organization. (p. 5)

Equally important, according to Block, in a definition of stewardship are the concepts of service, quality, and participation. Why are these important aspects of the workplace? The answer has to do with the bottom line. Economic issues and challenges are always at the forefront in business. Block (1993) states that the solution to our economic problems is not more money. Instead it is our "connection with our marketplace that is the answer to our concerns about economics" (p. 5). Through stewardship, that is, through "serving and focusing on quality, service, and participation first with our customers, employees, and suppliers, we will see an impact on the bottom line" (p. 5).

Moreover, Block (1993) states that successful stewardship operates at the "intersection of governance, spirituality, and the marketplace" (p. 19), and that

governance is about the giving over of power, privilege and purpose to employees, customers, suppliers and the community. Spirituality is the process of living out a set of deeply held personal values, of honoring forces or a presence greater than ourselves. It expresses our desire to find meaning in, and to treat as an offering what we do. To embrace steward-



ship is to discover that all that is possible as a member of the working and middle class. (p. 48)

The challenges facing business in the 21st century are a result of an evolution and revolution in how we sustain ourselves. Pre-industrial America was based on agriculture as a means to obtaining sustenance. In the postindustrial age our greatest assets are our emotional intelligence and our ability to take responsibility and make innovative decisions. According to Brandan (1998), the postindustrial American workplace has to do with “self-expression, intelligence, innovativeness, creativity, entrepreneurial individuality, and self-esteem” (p. 9). These characteristics are at a premium and as a result “modern business can no longer be run by a few people who think and many who do what they are told—the traditional military command and control model” (p. 2).

Block (1993) calls this a revolution in which both

spiritual values and the desire for economic success can be simultaneously fulfilled. Stewardship taken seriously is not just an economic strategy or a way to achieve higher levels of productivity or to success in a marketplace. It is also an answer to the spirit calling out. (p. 48)

To put it another way, Block states: “The marketplace for each institution is its reality. To embrace stewardship, choosing service over self-interest, is to join the testing ground for integrating personal and economic values and making the spirit concrete and practical” (1993, p. 49).

Similarly, Fairholm offers a definition related to the theme of trust and redistribution of power:

Stewardship connotes holding work resources in trust for a temporary period. In a stewardship team, power is inherent in each steward to help accomplish the stewardship team’s—not just the steward’s own—ends. It is by sharing equally all power that we become one, united. (1997, p. 147)



Robert Greenleaf, who wrote the seminal essay *The Servant as Leader*, described leadership entirely in terms of the leader's ability to serve first and then lead. Greenleaf provides the ultimate test of a leader in the following question:

Do those being served grow as persons; do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or at least, will he not be further deprived? (1997, p. 7)

Paradoxically, many successful leaders have learned that successful leadership begins with embracing the concepts of stewardship and servant-leadership. Lewin and Birute (2000), management consultants and researchers, have spoken with many business leaders who found:

It starts with you creating a new understanding of yourself. It entails a reflection of yourself; placing aside ego-driven needs and instead finding gratification and satisfaction in cultivating others; it's embracing the leader as servant. It's turning to the organization in a personal way as a way of changing the culture to one that accepts changes. It involves a reassessment of yourself, finding what is most important to you and taking a stand. It involves a reassessment of others—a trust and faith in people—and embracing democratic processes of self-governance. It begins as it did for the leaders in the stories, with nothing short of a personal conversation, that is, a difficult and often painful process of learning to let go of the illusion of control. (p. 264)

Dorothy Marcic, former Fulbright scholar and Director of Graduate Programs in Human Resource Development, places stewardship in the context of spiritual qualities of justice, respect, dignity, and the ability to love. According to Marcic (1997), the new management paradigm is a "package of behaviors, attitudes, decisions, and policies that reflect the organizations' spiritual essence" (p. 45). One of the virtues and subsequent behaviors is related to "trustworthiness—stewardship/management accountabil-



ity—managers assume honesty, customers, employees expect integrity and no scandals or misuse of funds; toward ethical behavior” (p. 47). This supports the concept that the company and its resources are placed in the hands of the leader for a temporary period of time.

Amitai Etzioni, sociologist and professor at Georgetown University, who has written extensively regarding community, defines stewardship in terms of a corporation’s responsibility for the community within which it is physically located. Etzioni (1993) asserts:

Too many business people no longer accept the responsibility of stewardship; at the very least to leave their communities no worse off than they found them. They no longer see it as their duty to reach beyond furthering self or corporate advancement or to serve as trustees of a social undertaking. (p. 28)

Peter Senge, management consultant and researcher, might not agree with Etzioni. Senge founded the Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) and the Sustainability Consortium, which brings together business leaders who see sustainability as a key strategic driver for business innovation and growth. Senge focuses on stewardship from the perspective of sustainability of society and nature, mainly through environmentalism. Additionally, Senge might not agree with Brandan that we have entered a truly postindustrial age. Senge writes:

What could constitute the beginnings of a truly postindustrial age? Only fundamental shifts in how the economic system affects the larger systems within which it resides—namely, society and nature. In many ways, the industrial age has been an era of harvesting natural and social capital in order to create financial and productive capital. So far there is little evidence that the New Economy is changing that. (Senge & Carstedt, 2001, p. 24)

According to Senge and Carstedt, globalization is destroying the last remnants of stewardship for natural resources, and the New Economy’s effects on social capital are equally disturbing. According to Senge, there



are three worldviews required to build sustainable enterprises: naturalism, humanism, and rationalism. To date, “rationalism has dominated society in business and education” (Senge & Carstedt, 2001, p. 26). At this stage, there is a need for humanism and naturalism. Senge defines humanism as arising “from the rich interior life that connects reason, emotion, and awareness—and ultimately allows us to connect with one another. Naturalism arises from our innate sense of being part of nature” (p. 26).

There is a need to let go of the old paradigm, that is, the notion that “the natural world exists as mere resources to serve human progress” (Senge & Carstedt, 2001, p. 27). It is time to embrace a new paradigm:

Yet the dim outlines of a new story are emerging. At its root are two elements: a new picture of the universe and a new sense of human possibility. “We are just beginning to explore what it means to be part of a universe that is alive. . . not just cosmos but cosmogenesis,” in the words of physicist Brian Swimme. Moreover, the new universe story “carries with it a psychic-spiritual dimension as well as a physical-materialistic dimension.” (Senge & Carstedt, 2001, p. 27)

A good example of this shift in thinking, according to Senge, is the appliance maker, Electrolux. Electrolux “uses water and power-based paints, prioritizes the use of recycled materials, and has introduced the world’s first family of refrigerators and freezers free of chlorofluorocarbons that contribute to ozone depletion” (Senge & Carstedt, 2001, p. 26).

#### CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH IMPLEMENTING STEWARD LEADER MODELS IN THE WORKPLACE

There are many challenges associated with implementing leadership models of stewardship that include trust, accountability, responsibility, and the distribution of power, command, and control. Senge might agree with Brandon concerning how the industrial age has impacted individuals working together: “Although the machine-age organization achieved previously unimaginable productivity, it also created a mechanized organizational





environment that dehumanized and fragmented how people worked together” (Senge & Carstedt, 2001, p. 27).

These challenges are related not only to the shift in mental models that need to occur, but also to the trust that has to be built. Companies

want to increase imagination and creativity without unleashing the passion that comes from personal vision. They seek to challenge established mental models without building real trust and openness. They espouse systems thinking, without realizing how threatening that can be to the established “quick fix” management cultures. There is a difference between building more-sustainable enterprises because there is profit in it and it is one’s life’s work. The journey ahead will require both. (Senge & Carstedt, 2001, p. 30)

In his text *Leadership and the Culture of Trust*, Fairholm states that building trust is one of the greatest challenges facing leadership today:

Today’s leaders see a model in which they build a shared vision, values and culture that trusts members to behave according to these shared values. Leader and followers work towards shared goals resulting in changes to the structure. People obey rules and regulations because they believe in them. The model focuses on teaching and sitting in Council with co-workers and then stepping back. (Fairholm, 1994, p. 49)

What is the importance of trust in an organization?

The presence of trust in an organization creates the environment where positive interaction can take place and the work of the organization can take place. The presence of trust has been demonstrated to be a key to productivity, individual performance, problem solving, team development, commitment and leadership. (Fairholm, 1994, pp. 118-124)

The researchers Kouzes and Posner’s leadership research also found that trust and an attitude of service are critical to successful leadership:

Leadership is something we experience in an interaction with another



human being. Leadership is a relationship, one between constituent and leader that is based on mutual needs and interests. The key to unlocking greater leadership potential can be found only when you seek to understand the service relationship. (Kouzes & Posner, 1993, p. 11)

In addition, the challenge of implementing the stewardship concept is partially based on the language that we use in business and leadership discussions. Kouzes and Posner (1993) explain:

Most of us conceive of the role of leader through the dominant metaphor of hierarchy. A *hierarchy* is at its roots a government by ecclesiastics: the word itself comes from the Greek for *holy* or *sacred*. In a sense, the modern day manager has inherited the status of a priest. Our language forces us to continue to conceptualize the leader follower relationship as hierarchical with words such as subordinate (sub meaning under and ordinate meaning order), someone of a lesser/lower importance. Words such as top-down, rank-ordered, superior-inferior, us versus them, management versus labor relationship. (p. 5)

#### POTENTIAL NEW PARADIGMS FOR IMPLEMENTING A STEWARD LEADER MODEL

Many of the challenges related to implementing the stewardship model are related to building a culture of trust; adopting new mental models related to the distribution of power, responsibility, and accountability; and developing selfless emotional intelligence. These challenges may seem to be insurmountable; however, a potential solution or initial avenue of inquiry may be found in adaptive complexity science and the concept of emergent teams. Lewin and Birute (2000) describe emergent teams as the implementation of a serving organization:

In emergent teams, everyone jumps into action; everyone intuitively knows what needs to be done; different people guide the collective action at different times, depending on the current needs and who has the requisite skills to match; the right people turn up at the right time; and it's all



done in the spirit of good will and care. . . . [also called] the soul at work.  
(p. 280)

What are the characteristics of emergent teams? Value is placed on inquiry. That is, emergent teams are opportunity-seeking rather than just problem-solving. There is a sense of openness that is created by providing “opportunities for people to learn, to participate, and contribute, and they do this by opening up projects to self-selection. They are also open with information and resources” (Lewin & Birute, 2000, pp. 290-291).

Marcic refers to this as a value and a behavior having to do with service and humility. She defines these as “customer orientation; quality movement; sharing power; learning to be a servant” (1997, p. 47). Additionally, Marcic, like Block, Fairholm, and Senge, places service into a context of a higher calling, explaining that “developing this spirit of service can be an important factor in creating a higher purpose for workers” (p. 78). A good example of this is the company ServiceMaster, whose mission is “to honor God in all we do, to help people develop, to pursue excellence, and to grow profitably” (p. 116).

Senge echoes this sentiment that service and quality is key to the new paradigm of business: “Today we must understand a customer and serve a genuine need” (Senge & Carstedt, 2001, p. 32). This requires successful leaders to demonstrate trust and credibility among their employees, customers, suppliers, and communities. In the new leadership and economic paradigm, leaders are in a state of surrender, letting go. The Economist W. Brian Arthur states that business today should follow these three stages:

- Observe, observe, observe: become one with the world
- Reflect and retreat: listen from the inner place where knowing comes to the surface
- Act in an instant: incubate and bring forth the new into reality. (Senge & Carstedt, 2001, p. 36)

Arthur’s advice echoes what Greenleaf (1997) described as the characteristics of servant-leadership in his essay: listening; reflection and contem-



plation; intuition; and foresight (that is, making decisions based on a leader's ability to foresee the future); and finally, taking action.

#### SUMMARIZING THE DEFINITION OF STEWARDSHIP

In summary, the review of the literature indicates that the stewardship concept is full of potential and possibility for the future of business. It is replete with the ideas of trust, service, quality, sustainability, bottom-line results, and serving a higher purpose. Moreover, the challenges to implementation and sustainability have to do more with the mental models of command and control and self-ego than with the systems and structure that support an organization.

#### DISCUSSION OF HOW ONE BUSINESS LEADER HAS IMPLEMENTED A STEWARD LEADER MODEL

What are leaders saying about stewardship and its potential? How are steward leaders perpetuating the legacy of the stewardship model? A colleague identified the Dean of Business, Marketing, and General Studies at a Technical Vocational College as an individual who professes the steward model. During an informal field interview, the steward leader responded to the following questions:

How do you define the steward leader?

What are the challenges associated with implementing this concept in the workplace?

What are you doing to perpetuate a legacy of stewardship in the workplace?

The table below summarizes the interview data that pertains to these questions. Ethnograph was used to assist with noticing themes in the participants' responses.



The Leader as Steward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Paves the way and is a risk taker</li><li>• Does not cast blame, in fact takes credit for blame</li><li>• Is internally motivated</li><li>• Is motivated by helping others not by money</li><li>• Serving others and making a lasting influence in their lives</li><li>• Lives the values of accountability and responsibility</li></ul>
Challenges to Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• American business quantifies people and sees people in terms of dollars</li><li>• Cutting costs without cutting people is an exercise and practice that ensures we are operating in the best way we can</li></ul>
Perpetuating a Steward Leader Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Encourages others to take risks and be accountable for their values and lives</li><li>• Focuses on continuous learning and improvement</li><li>• Implemented a flat organization structure without department chairs or vice presidents</li><li>• Anonymously donated and began a tuition endowment for the college staff to achieve their next higher degree and add to their salary advancement</li></ul>

#### EIGHT ELEMENTS OF THE STEWARD LEADER MODEL

This article begins with the premise that a deeper understanding of the stewardship concept offers business leaders an opportunity to integrate transformational and economic values into an organization's operation model. Leaders, researchers, and consultants who seek to operationalize and perpetuate a stewardship model may wish to consider the following learnings:

First, the steward leader understands that *to embrace stewardship he or she must release old paradigms*. It involves letting go of power, ego, command and control; and embracing trust, accountability, and risk taking. In some organizations, this kind of change threatens the status quo. As Senge notes: "The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back" (Lewin & Birute, 2000, p. 227). I take the stance that successful stewardship organizations are led by leaders who have *chosen* to be steward leaders and take the initiative by letting go of ego, power, and control. Steward leaders are intrinsically motivated.

Second, *service is a key component of steward leadership*. By serving



others, whether employees, customers, suppliers, or the community, we give meaning to our work and therefore to the existence of humanity. “Taking care of others and seeing it as an important service can create a sense of meaning in work, giving employees a reason to exert themselves” (Marcic, 1997, p. 78). I suggest that this external focus on others, such as our customers, holds the key for transforming many businesses.

A third learning has to do with *knowing one’s stakeholders and being accountable to them*. Perhaps *being accountable* to those whom you serve is a better term than *caring for* those you serve. Block (1993) calls this stewardship in which we are “accountable to those we have power over” whether it be employee, customer, supplier, or community (p. 22).

Fourth, *stewardship is not equivalent to guardianship*. Often we place ourselves into leadership positions of caring for followers through command and control. There are many hierarchical command and control organizations that also “care” about their employees, customers, suppliers, and communities. Guardian organizations are not empowering organizations; many times there is an overreliance on past executives and “this is the way we’ve always done things.” In my career as a business executive and consultant, I have observed organizations in which title, entitlement, and position are important, and in those organizations there was also a culture of caring that often prohibited creativity, innovation, and independent thinking.

A fifth learning is that *continuous learning and continuous improvement are the ingredients to perpetuating stewardship* in an organization. Gaining understanding of employees, customers, suppliers, and the community is a life-long purpose. Senge notes: “The number one impediment in building a learning organization is that it takes time, patience, perseverance, and dedication” (Porter, 2001, p. 31).

That leads to a sixth learning: *true sustainability is based on people*. As challenging as it is to embrace stewardship related to environmentalism because of the market advantage and recovered costs involved, it is much more challenging to embrace stewardship related to employees, that is, giv-



ing over power and accountability. Richard Teerlin, the retired chairman and CEO of Harley Davidson, says:

If you believe as I do that people are the only sustainable competitive advantage, then leaders have to view their responsibility differently. They must create an environment in which groups of people voluntarily come together around a shared vision and work toward shared goals. (Porter, 2001, p. 31)

A seventh learning, and one that I believe is critical to business transformation, leadership, and spirituality in the workplace, is that *language plays an important role in changing the mental models*. Leaders are not using the language and words of spiritual leadership in the day-to-day language and conversations within the organization. The words, contained within a mission statement, are compartmentalized from the day-to-day language used by individuals within the organization. Words are the lens through which we examine our experiences and contexts. Words are used to create the mission and the vision for the organization. What type of context does a leader create with words like: top-down, hierarchical, subordinate, hunting for business, target accounts, human capital, and maximizing resources including people?

And, finally, the most important learning is that *trust is at the heart of stewardship*. And, trust is easily lost and difficult to regain. Fairholm (1994) states that there has been a breakdown in trust in the workplace: "Socially, politically and organizationally, there is a breakdown in trust. This has resulted in people suffering from isolation, anxiety, and anomie. Unless workers trust the leader's motives and their ability to lead, they will not follow" (p. 103). Jeffrey Pfeffer (1998), professor, researcher, and economist, has stated that putting people first builds profits and that trust is a key component of building sustainable employees:

It is almost impossible to implement high commitment work practices in the absence of mutual trust and respect. But trust is missing in many employment relationships—and missing in many of the economic theory-



based analyses of these relationships. Thus, beyond the specific practices, the atmosphere in the work place is crucial. All work practices and changes should be evaluated by a simple criterion: do they convey and create trust, or do they signify distrust and destroy trust and respect among people? (p. 62)

#### CONCLUSION: questions for further reflection and dialogue

I propose that steward leaders are stewards of their organizations and of the hopes of their stakeholders. They are servant-leaders working to serve their customers and employees. These leaders describe their roles in terms of social and moral responsibility and making leadership choices that include the common good. The steward-leader model deserves more study in terms of who the business leaders are who are practicing stewardship and how they have implemented the steward leader model in their organizations. For leaders who are engaged in the steward-leader model or are thinking about choosing this component of transformational leadership as their leadership praxis, I conclude this article with potential questions for reflection and dialogue:

- How do I unleash potential for the common good?
- How generous am I?
- What do I choose to release in order to be steward leader?
- How has my leadership caused others to grow as people?
- Is there a spirit of service to one another, to clients, to suppliers within my organization?
- Is there a deep level of trust, openness, and commitment in my organization?
- How active are trustees in perpetuating the stewardship model in my organization? How active are they in leading my company?
- Is the organization acknowledging the need to serve?
- What is the “language” of my organization?





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