

“Practicing Good Stewardship Requires CEO and Board Leadership”

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The term “stewardship” is used with great frequency both in religious and secular organizations. We too often take for granted that we and others know what we mean when we use the word, and it is tossed off so that we sound profound without any further exploration of the richness of the concept.

“Stewardship” is invoked at least once a year during church annual fund drives, by environmental groups who urge us to take care of planet Earth, by some who encourage us to live frugally so that we can share our leftover resources with other, by some others who equate stewardship with giving time to nonprofit organizations.

To make certain that we are discussing the same thing in the context of our nonprofit businesses, let us consider accepting this definition of the concept:

Stewardship means taking care of something we value so that we enable it to grow. It calls us to take responsibility and to make a contribution of our whole selves – time, talent, and treasure.

Something we value is a thing we need – that meets our needs. When we inventory those people and organizations that fit this definition, we can begin to understand why we are compelled to help them succeed.

For us to practice good stewardship there must be intentionality about our commitment and our actions to be a positive presence with the people and organizations we value. With an attitude of stewardship, we will no longer be casual about our involvement and support. As the principal leaders of your nonprofit business, you must take leadership responsibility for creating an environment and an attitude of good stewardship throughout your organization.

It is common and wise practice for every nonprofit organization to have an annual financial audit conducted by a nonrelated CPA firm. This, and the publication of an annual report, gives confidence to your staff, board, donors, and the general public that the organization is on sound financial footing and that contributions are being properly used. It gives, as well, insight into your overall financial stewardship.

In addition to the financial audit, we suggest that consideration be given to conducting a stewardship audit -- a personal and organizational review that can help affirm your and your organizational strengths. You will also likely identify and remove barriers to fulfilling your mission.

- As the CEO, evaluate your stewardship of your staff members.

- Are expectations fair and clear?
 - Are the right people in the best positions that utilize their talents?
 - Are staff members consulted before making decisions concerning their areas of responsibilities?
 - Are you taking the lead in creating an environment that is positive and welcoming?
 - Do you encourage a team approach to problem-solving and management?
 - Do you give credit and reward quality staff ideas and work?
- Next, share your self-assessment with your management team and get their feedback. Ask them to consider the messages that are being used to define your organization and how you are conveying them to your constituencies.
 - Have you defined the key areas/programs that resonate with your prospects and supporters?
 - Are these messages being expressed in terms of how your work meets their needs?
 - Do you ask for feedback from those reporting to you, seriously consider their ideas, and given them credit for ideas put into practice?
 - Are there ways besides giving money that constituents can be connected to your organization?
 - Do you have a clear and compelling statement of the case for support of your organization that includes your commitment to be good stewards of the resources you are given and provide in services to your clients/students?
 - Are you being efficient and effective in telling your story through the use of new technologies?
- Following that, provide an opportunity for all staff members to talk about their approaches to their work and to the mission of your organization. Discuss and record responses to these questions:
 - Are you a good steward of your time and organization's resources?
 - Do you look for efficiencies and make your ideas known?
 - Do you give extra time and effort, when necessary, to complete a project?
 - Do you ask for feedback from those reporting to you, seriously consider their ideas, and given them credit for ideas put into practice?
 - Do you demonstrate by your attitude your commitment to the organization's mission?

- Ask your Board chair to conduct a session for members to think about their commitment to the organization of which they share ownership. Conduct the discussion around these questions:
 - What strengths do you bring to the Board that will help move the organization forward?
 - Are your strengths being utilized -- and if not, will you be proactive in correcting this situation?
 - Do you view the budget in terms of how it advances the mission of the organization?
 - Do you support the hiring of investment managers based on performance rather than friendship?
 - Do you actively find ways to engage more people in knowledge, appreciation, and support of your organization?
 - Do you insist on sound stewardship in the management of the organization and support the CEO in these efforts?
 - Do you make a financial contribution that is commensurate with your ability and your leadership position?
 - Are you providing leadership in planning to set the strategic objectives to ensure the organization has clearly defined its future growth in service?
 - Do you insist that each new prospective Board member is committed to make your organization a priority?

The practice of good stewardship begins with an appreciation of its importance and continues as a living part of the organization's culture.

We suggest that the topic of ways to be better stewards of your organization's resources be a regular item on staff meeting agendas. Further, updates on the subject should be given at every Board meeting. To be a good steward does not mean becoming parsimonious. Instead, stewardship should be viewed as a means to a more abundant and productive organization that is better able to accomplish its goals of service to society.