

Quick, for the person at the head of an organization, what characteristic is clearly the most important for long-term organizational success? Well, “leadership” is a popular answer, if the time, effort, and emphasis of American businesses and nonprofits and churches and politics are any real indication! Yes, seminars, training, online resources, popular books...it’s kinda crazy, just go to a Barnes and Noble bookstore where you can see the actual bookshelves revealing the large volume of what’s popular for Americans on the theme of leadership. It really is stunning—we can see that many people really want to know how to be a strong leader, and they’re willing to pursue literally hundreds of theories and opinions about leadership.

And, you know something? Leadership is indeed a really important tool for organizational success! But, frankly, that’s all leadership really is—a tool. Yes, leadership is just a tool, like other tools that can be highly useful, like a laptop or a mobile phone or a quick wit or a skill like software programming. But the central question should be this: what are those various tools supposed to be utilized for—the end game? For organizations, all tools exist to accomplish just one thing for the organization. And that’s *stewardship*!

Wait a minute, you might say, that’s what I mean by the focus of leadership—good stewardship! Well, you may in fact think that. But, the reality is, there are many people who are perceived as leaders who are not good stewards—yes, many leaders are often not good stewards! Here’s a common but quite startling experience of mine. When I sometimes ask a person in high authority in an organization what they are stewards of, many cannot easily answer that question! And that’s something they should dwell on all the time! Yes, you heard that right, leaders often cannot crisply identify what they are stewards of.

Don’t believe that? How about if you walk into a typical church in America: what would the pastor and deacons say the primary stewardship of their local church is? You know, something really valuable and concrete. Is it holding weekly worship services? Is it service to the homeless? Is it the Great Commission—going forth and making disciples? Is it political influence? Is it ministry to the elderly? Is it supporting Israel? Is it NextGen? Or is it a mix of these, and more? I dare say that you would find that many would say several stewardships are simultaneously being worked on in their church. OK, that *is* a challenge of modern churches. But can and do they excellently fulfill legitimate, multiple stewardships simultaneously?

So, the next question naturally is, how do *you* specifically measure stewardship success in *your* church? You know, like how you might measure a professional coach via wins or a CEO via increase on behalf of investors? For example, does your church report how many people responded to the church’s gospel messaging this past year, whether locally or on worldwide missions trips? Does it even track that kind of measurement? The early church certainly tracked this, from the very beginning at Peter’s Pentecost sermon...be sure to check out the podcast episode “Is God a Metrics God?” for a rendering of this! So, has God stopped assessing the fruit-bearing actions of His modern-day church? Is a local church not edified by knowing its fruits? Or have local churches lost interest? And, are there other stewardships for your local body? Specifically, how do you effectively measure and report fruits for several such stewardships?

Now, to be sure, there can be and should be a very strong connection between leadership and stewardship. But often there is a very significant gap between the perceived leadership and the actual stewardship. Remember that Jesus had throngs of people rejoicing upon his entry into Jerusalem, but then only a very few people were there at the Cross soon thereafter. And the Cross was the very event where Jesus was fulfilling the greatest stewardship in all history—His atoning sacrifice on behalf of the whole world. But right there in the midst of that, some sneered at a perceived lack of fulfilling His promises and for not using His leadership powers! The truth is, Jesus clearly never gave a hoot about whether His disciples *or* His detractors perceived Him as a great leader. Instead, whether alone with His Father or with others, He simply went about perfectly fulfilling the stewardship roles given to Him. *This* is the very best example of leadership being perceived as weak while stewardship is actually being fulfilled very well!

Another issue is when it's the other way around: a strong perception of great leadership while long-term stewardship actually falls short, or even fails. Here, think of national politics, say, in America. How many elected politicians have been reliably horrendous stewards of citizens' taxes, of many trillions of borrowed money, and of regulatory power? Yet, many Americans still consider it a great honor to meet Congresspeople and fawn all over them because they simply hold "high" office. Sadly, the truth is largely this: however reflexively honored, powerful political "leadership" has often resulted in devastating stewardship. And this framework is often the rule, not the exception, from dictatorships to democracies. In just over a decade in power as *der Führer* (yes, that's German for "leader"), Adolf Hitler not only exterminated millions of Jews, he led his people into a needless war that cost many lives, left the German economy in tatters, and led to the splitting of Germany itself in two for many decades. But he was perceived as a strong leader by many Germans during his tenure. Yes, strongly perceived leadership, but horrible long-term stewardship.

The roots of this phenomenon start early. The reality is, Americans are often infatuated in a very unhealthy way with a type of *ideology* of leadership. Grade-school children are lauded for their supposed leadership. But just what is a third-grader a thoughtful steward of? Even with children, Americans often tend to crowd out the anchor of substantive stewardship with the perception of the popular leadership of others.

Businesses in the public arena struggle with these issues, too. CEOs and Boards of publicly-held companies are pressured and work very hard to be perceived as good short-term stewards as each and every quarter-year rolls around, but that is often at the expense of long-term stewardship that requires real financial sacrifice and investment...sacrifice that is not during just one quarter, but for years. We don't have to look any further than Amazon, a company that sacrificed profits for years while building a long-term business whose worth is now measured at well more than a trillion dollars. Many retail competitors that were happily reporting results from their short-term focus during Amazon's money-losing, building years are now known to manifest poor stewardship responding to the new landscape that Amazon was pioneering.

And, as with the life and times of Jesus's first advent, the Christian life itself is designed for long-term stewardship of the right things, *not* short-term leadership of the wrong things. The Pharisees were threatened by Jesus. They did not perceive themselves as stewards of the faith of Abraham...instead, they perceived themselves as stewards of people's conformity to the Law, apparently as expediently evidenced by submission to their harsh leadership. Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee, was right in the heart of that camp, persecuting followers of Jesus like Stephen. But then Saul believed, becoming the great Apostle Paul who succeeded as an astounding steward of the fresh New Covenant truths of God: Christ and Him crucified, God's salvific plan and amazing grace, the spread of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Like Paul, the very foremost question for any Christian—actually, any *human*—is "what am I steward of?" This must be answered both first *and* well, if leadership is to be a well-utilized tool to serve solid long-term stewardship.

In my *Lasting Greatness* seminar videos you can find at whitestone.org, I first address this overarching, core goal of organizational stewardship, and only then do I secondarily address the leadership that supports stewardship. That's because, as I remind my university students over and over, *leadership exists only to serve stewardship, not vice versa*. Again, *leadership exists only to serve stewardship, not vice versa*.

In 1996, Gordon Fee, the astute, widely-acclaimed theologian and general editor of the New International Commentary series, noted the "generally ineffective witness and perceived irrelevancy of the church in Western culture." And how much less effective is the American church now, many years later? What does seem to be clear is this: one of the root-causes of Fee's observation is an un-anchored, self-centered focus on perceived *leadership* as opposed to clear, anchored, others-centered focus on Biblical *stewardship*. If only we were to reduce all the infatuation about and emphasis on leadership recognition and replace it with the humble seeking to bear fruit as stewards for others. You know, like Jesus? Let's renew our focus!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Give an example of and details about someone you personally know who typically nails meaningful stewardship in the key parts of his or her life. How do you personally persevere in fulfilling a similar framework?
2. What would the pastor and deacons/elders of your church say their primary stewardship is? Or perhaps the key stewardships (plural)? Be concrete and specific.
3. How does your church specifically create accountability for, then measure and report on their targeted stewardship(s)? Be specific.