

For years now, I have pounded several key ideas into the hearts and minds of both university students and organizational leaders. One of those key ideas is that of a *knowledge worker*. But for a long time, I lost track where I might have picked up that phrase. Then I rediscovered the phrase where it apparently originated—from the book *The Effective Executive* published in 1966 by the highly influential Peter Drucker, who's often called the "father of modern management." An early Whitestone episode was "The Evergreen Target of Being an Elite Knowledge Worker"—this episode is another dive into this key pursuit.

By now, a number of high-end researchers have tackled the idea of a "knowledge worker." But, curiously, it seems that their work tends to fall short in crisply explaining what a knowledge worker really is...and we can see why that may be hard. Still, it's really kind of weird: when I have simply said "knowledge worker" countless times in classes and seminars with listeners ranging in age from 18 to 80, well, they seem to instantly grasp the idea pretty darn well. I think that's because it's kinda like what U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously said about pornography: "I know it when I see it." See, Justice Stewart had been a Lieutenant in the U.S. Navy in World War II, and he had often been on watch and observed the printed materials that enlisted sailors brought back on ship when going on shore leave: "I know it when I see it." But is that good enough for us for this topic?

Let's take a look at who many observers might say are knowledge workers from the perspective of organizational success. Say, Steve Jobs of Apple. Berry Gordy of Motown. Bill Gates of Microsoft. But selecting these amazing people misses this one very key point about knowledge workers: *every one of us is appointed by God to be an excellent knowledge worker in whatever our hand finds to do!* That can feel a little presumptive—should we really expect to be as good as Berry Gordy or Steve Jobs? Maybe not in exactly the same way, but the fact is, we should really try—in *our* context—because it's our privilege to be a knowledge worker in the work our hand finds to do...especially important in our era of radical change.

So, let's start by getting some historical context. For thousands of years, humanity tended to simply absorb the working knowledge of many generations preceding them, generations in the same locality who dutifully passed down what they knew, knowledge that was tried and true for decades or even centuries: perhaps how to plant and harvest rice...maybe how to be a butcher, baker, or candlestick maker.

But take modern farming in America. Talk about change—agriculture is an industry sector where, say, 80-90% of the population worked two centuries ago and now just 1-2% produce wildly more yield per capita than back then. Farmers morphed from the backbreaking work of farming a few acres using a crude plow behind a farm animal to overseeing massive machines farming many thousands of acres, including digitally measuring the exact moisture content of the soil and executing detailed, fully-automated navigation instructions delivered via GPS connections. And modern conservation methods have helped rejuvenate tired, worn-out land. And beyond simple subsistence farming for a family or two, "going to market" now ranges from festive local markets full of rich organic produce to international supply chain excellence traversing the entire world. You name virtually every farming task, the agricultural practices of the 21st century would be totally unrecognizable to the feudal serf of yesteryear serving the feudal lords of Europe.

But we don't have to go back centuries for such contrasts. How about an accountant not very many years ago, using a manual adding machine, a paper columnar pad, and a sharpened pencil—no software...no Excel spreadsheets. How about a car mechanic a few years back with just a wrench and a greasy rag—no fancy computer diagnostics. And, how about a medical doctor then with a simple stethoscope and a few questions—no blood tests, no lab procedures, no MRIs. And, how about a CEO mostly flying by the seat of his pants—no computers, little data. So, do you want to live in the 20th century...or the 21st century?

Here's what our Peter Drucker wrote in 1999, the last year of the 20th century: "*The most valuable asset of a 21st-century institution, whether business or non-business, will be its knowledge workers and their productivity.*" Note that Drucker wrote that well over two decades ago—and then think about some of

the companies in their relative infancy when he wrote that: Google, Amazon, Apple, for example. Do you think that radical change is all over for us now? 'Course not! Talk about a wake-up call for us from Drucker!

But listen now, listen to this throwback example that can sound pretty familiar, even today: how about a business or nonprofit leader with a deficient understanding of the rapidly-changing realities that face their organization, one with inadequate digitally-informed understanding, one who just says "get with my people." For sure, it's easy to become intimidated or overwhelmed by the ever-growing complexities of a 21st-century organization. But it's kinda weird: in the modern era, it's often the accountant, the mechanic, or the doctor who *has* successfully morphed to true knowledge worker status—while some executives at or near the top of the organization chart have functionally thrown up their hands in surrender. In short, these types of executives have slowly succumbed, they've gradually lapsed into ineffective placeholders rather than continuously growing into the full-blown knowledge workers necessary to be fruitful 21st-century stewards. Is that rare? Hardly. In my experience and observations, that's a-happenin' quite often!

So, let's embrace the reality of needing to be a great knowledge worker. And let's not say something like "I know it when I see it" because something's hard to define. Instead, let's take a stab at a helpful definition of knowledge workers, whether a worker is more of a front-line worker or a CEO. Try this one...

Regardless of individual roles or positions, 21st-century knowledge workers succeed by continuously improving at their stewardship of all their organizational responsibilities and privileges. To be the best stewards, they seek to continuously perform at the highest levels of competence by: first, astutely drawing upon still-relevant anchors of the past; second, productively elevating the positioning of the present; and third, leveraging the opportunities of the ever-evolving, sometimes-inventible future.

Did you fully get that? Yes, stewardship competence is *the* goal of the knowledge worker! And that's built by astutely incorporating past learnings, elevating present positioning, and properly preparing for future opportunities. This past-present-future mix is always shifting, so it must be top-of-mind for the knowledge worker, especially the leader dealing with numerous complexities and integration difficulties.

We can often learn a whole lot from highly recognizable failures in stewardship, so let's look at what *not* to do for a particular past-present-future mix—in this case, Caiaphas, the high priest of Jesus' time who delivered Jesus to Pontius Pilate to be crucified. First, let's hear from Hosea, the Old Testament prophet.

Hosea 4:6 (ESV) says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest for me." Now, centuries later, the high priest Caiaphas rejected Christ. First, Caiaphas' approaches revealed little heed to God's anchoring *past*, much less Hosea's specific warning. Indeed, there were many warnings to the Old Testament priests—instructions that Caiaphas had clearly hardened his heart to. Then, in the *present*, Caiaphas went for the wrong type of positioning. Caiaphas had actually been (wrongly) appointed by the *Roman government* to be priest and he seemed to act as if more concerned with Caesar's will than with God's will. And as to his knowledge of the *future*, here's the account in Mark 14:61a-64b: "...the high priest [Caiaphas] asked [Jesus], 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' And Jesus said, 'I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.' And the high priest tore his garments and said, 'What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. ...'" So, here's the 1,2,3: first, we find Caiaphas heedless of Hosea's *past* words about knowledge. Then Caiaphas prioritized badly in the *present*. Then Caiaphas was blind to the *future*. Yes, the future was staring Caiaphas right in the face—a new High Priest named Jesus was standing before Him, ready to replace him. And Caiaphas rejected all of that...

As for us, Hosea's words about knowledge and rejection are alive with meaning...and worthy for us to ponder this very day—from several angles, don't you think? *Knowledge worker*. Specifically...accountant, mechanic, doctor, executive. Whatever our roles, we must seek the highest standards of stewardship and competence by thoughtfully managing every dimension of this delicate mix: *past, present, and future*.

A&A: Application & Action

1. If objective, savvy observers were to look at your vocational life, how would they rate you on your performance as a knowledge worker? What about in your spiritual life? Be specific about status and any necessary remedies.

2. What kind of knowledge-worker status would your customers or your owners say your workplace organization is reaping? Be specific about status and any necessary remedies.

3. What kind of knowledge worker-status would God say your church is reaping? Be specific about status and any necessary remedies.