

## Mastering the Art of Stewardship

*“I am doing the best that I can, but it’s not enough. The other crew doesn’t seem to care about the equipment here. They beat it up, they run it dry, and they don’t put things back. They just don’t seem to understand that our future and our jobs depend on taking care of this equipment so we can take care of our customers. The practice of good stewardship is lost.”*

People who are closest to the equipment and processes, closest to the facilities and machinery, are the ones who can make or break the competitive position of the business. Quite often, our challenge is to help everyone understand and appreciate that if we don’t do that, if we abuse or ignore equipment problems, then we are potentially opening the door to the competition—here or in a foreign country. The longer we tolerate the lack of good stewardship of our businesses’ capital assets, the more the attitude becomes, “Why should I care? I’ve cared in the past, and others came along and systematically undermined everything I tried to do. And nobody did anything to prevent that.”

### Being Good Stewards

Many people in today’s workplace truly care. They are doing their best to take care of equipment and tools in their workplaces. Their watchful eyes prevent damage that hurts business. They understand that when their plant or facility is running right, then their customers are happy, management is happy, work is much easier, and their jobs are more secure than if they didn’t care. But it’s more than just maintaining things the way we’ve always done.

“Maintenance” means sustaining desired levels of performance, and in our business, this translates into equipment, process, and facility reliability. Good maintenance assures the capacity to produce desired products. So maintenance in its purest form is stewardship—the personal responsibility to take care of something owned by someone else. But stewardship goes well beyond those with maintenance job titles.

In a reliable and competitive plant or facility, anybody who makes decisions or takes actions that impact equipment performance and reliability is a steward. They all know how their actions affect the revenue generating capacity of the process, plant, and facility. There is a common focus, a shared vision about the importance of the capital assets, investments of owners and shareholders, and their personal role and responsibilities to assure reliable and stable operations. Think of NASCAR race teams. They have to have reliable racecars just to qualify for a race. They truly practice good stewardship.

In an unreliable, problem-prone plant or facility struggling to compete, there are those who don’t seem to care, as lamented by the quote at the beginning of this column. Unfortunately, it only takes a few non-caring individuals to undermine the stability, the reliability of a process, plant, or facility. That’s the thing with reliability. It often only takes one to upset the balance and cause unplanned downtime or inefficient operations, which leads to higher costs.

### Mastering the Art of Stewardship

Mastering the art of stewardship might not be easy, but it can be well worth the effort, especially considering the alternative. At first blush, it seems simple to responsibly care for property owned by others. So what is it that makes it so difficult to achieve in today’s workplaces? Is it the “not my

job” attitude? Is it a “why should I care” mindset? Or is it that most people have not been taught what the benefits of being a good steward on the job?

First of all, there must be a very clear “shared organization vision” that emphasizes the critical importance on individual contributions. Communicating a vision for stewardship should address the benefits and the “WIIFMs” (what’s in it for me) when we take care of the equipment and processes.

Second are the organization’s values. In other words, what are the beliefs that encourage the individual and group behaviors and support the vision. Here is where senior leadership earns their stripes: modeling and consistently communicating the fundamental organizational values. And these values are not overly complicated. Values that support good stewardship might include quality, safety, reliability, and empowerment.

Third is the work environment. Allowing conditions that communicate that “our vision is just words and not actions” prevents people from believing in the vision. And consistency of these conditions is critical. No one person, office, or crew can be exempt. Starting in one critical area of the plant or facility and building, a culture of good stewardship shows what can be done and what is expected in your organization. Or if areas already exist showcase, them as “islands of excellence.” People in that area are showing responsible care for their equipment and processes. Leverage the experience in that island to expand to other areas.

Fourth relates to personnel decisions and actions. Leadership cannot afford to show favoritism, nor can they look the other way when the organization values or work environments are compromised. For example, if taking care of the maintenance shops means organization and orderliness, where tools and supplies are easy to access and fit for service, where tools and equipment are properly maintained and stored, and where the work area is well lighted and safe leadership has to reinforce that standard. When another shop looks like a bomb went off and clutter abounds but nothing is done to change it, others will soon believe that leadership has a double standard. That double standard will undermine the values and beliefs and prevent good stewardship from prevailing.

Fifth in the critical elements of mastering the art of stewardship is leadership. From senior leaders to front-line leaders, all leaders are heading in the same direction. What does that look like? First, leadership must be able to see that the vision for stewardship is important for business success and important for their personal satisfaction and success. Second, leadership must honestly believe that this is the right thing to do. And third, leadership must be able to articulate their belief, to talk it and to walk the talk. Lastly, leadership must teach others in their areas of responsibility: Motivate others through coaching, encouragement, and recognition.

Leadership “walking the talk” is crucial. Good stewardship means that people look after the equipment and the work areas in ways that allow potential problems to be spotted before they turn into failures or unplanned downtime. Leaders must put this vision and the supporting values into action. When they observe conditions that go against what is defined as good stewardship they communicate where the gap is and what should be done to treat the equipment properly and most importantly why this is important. If need be, the leaders provide assistance or resources, or make time available to help the personnel in the area learn how good stewardship should look.

## **Synonyms of Stewardship**

Synonyms of stewardship include care, custody, guardianship, watchfulness, and vigilance. Notice the theme of responsibility for something that likely belongs to others? And there are many examples of stewardship. Corporate stewardship refers to how businesses manage the resources under their own control including the long-term maximization of financial, social, and environmental assets and the total return on investment for the individual company according to the US Chamber of Commerce. Financial or fiscal stewardship refers to the practice of assuring that current spending programs and tax policies are affordable and sustainable over time. Environmental stewardship of process equipment is needed to reduce the release of hazardous pollutants from processing plants, to reduce the number of injuries to plant operators and members of the public that can result from such releases. The chemical industry refers to their stewardship as “Responsible Care.” Scriptural (Jewish, Christian, Islamic) stewardship invests humans with a moral responsibility in safeguarding God’s creation and to faithfully care for all that has been entrusted to a believer.

Equipment stewardship means that we, the employees working with and on the company’s equipment, have the responsibility to make sure that it operates properly throughout its life cycle and is not abused or damaged. Taking care of the very assets that provide wages and salaries, which makes businesses successful in the eyes of the customers, the employees, and the owners or shareholders is good stewardship.

A vision for good stewardship: “Our facilities, our processes, and our equipment are critical to our business success. Our product quality, our employees’ safety, our equipment reliability and performance depend on how well we care for these assets. We provide the skills and knowledge necessary to empower our employees to be good stewards of everything they use to do their jobs.”

See it, believe it, talk it, walk it and teach it. We can make a difference as good stewards.

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