

ISFM Orlando 2009: "Best Practices in Frontier Mission"

Stewards of Experience

by Leon Torkko, Laura and Eric Adams

A Practical, Spiritual Discipline

In 1 Peter 4:7-10, Peter reminds his readers,

... Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of the varied grace of God. Whoever speaks, let it be with God's words. Whoever serves, do so with the strength that God supplies, so that in everything God will be glorified through Jesus Christ.

God's plan of blessing all peoples continues to go forward towards its promised, glorious end. Peter's exhortation reminds us of our part in this drama: we are to be good stewards of our gifts. Stewardship is the careful management of something entrusted to one's care, something valuable enough that it calls for intentional thought about how to understand it, enhance it, share it and put it to use.

Stewards should neither use their gifts for their own benefit nor neglect them. Rather, it is our privilege and our responsibility to put gifts to use serving one another and serving God's kingdom. This responsibility extends to everything we have received from God: time, money, energy, skills, relationships, and even wisdom gained from our experiences.

This is a practical, spiritual discipline, an outworking of our faithfulness and integrity. The responsibility of stewardship is a reminder that each of us belongs to Christ and to the community of his disciples.

What We Steward

People and organisations are responsible for many assets, such as finances, time, co-workers, products, public image and reputation. Historically, leaders have given much attention to managing—stewarding—these assets to effectively serve the mission at hand. Principles and practices to do this are well known. However, another precious asset entrusted to our care is practical knowledge. This includes insight and skills gained through experience. These also must be faithfully stewarded.

Knowledge stewardship is not about the creation of an encyclopaedia attempting to capture everything that anybody knows. Instead, the practice of knowledge

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stewardship involves activities such as these:

- developing the skills of reflecting and evaluating in the midst of tasks
- generating ways to track who is learning principles for excelling in particular tasks
- nurturing an environment that encourages people to communicate openly
- creating conditions in which “practical knowledge” can be identified, discovered, captured, shared, distilled, validated, transferred, adopted, adapted, and applied to meet the mission and goals of the organisation

The growing habits of knowledge stewardship can influence an organisation’s culture, processes, training and technology.

In fact, successful stewardship of practical knowledge enables us to steward our other assets more effectively. This type of stewardship ideally allows insights and skills to become accessible to co-workers within the organisation as well as within a wider network of those working toward similar ends.

Table 1 gives examples of several types of practical knowledge every organization can steward.

Examples of Knowledge Stewardship in Action

Peer Coaching

During one of their regular meetings, a team in Africa used a questionnaire based on a list of known fruitful practices. They intentionally listened to each other and tried to discern how God had been at work among

them and through their efforts. This led the team into deep conversations about their strengths and weaknesses. Among other things, they scored themselves as “2” on a scale of 1-5 in their language usage as a team. In their region, teams with more fruitful ministries tended to score “4.”

They asked their organisation’s knowledge stewardship facilitators to refer them to teams in their area involved in similar work who were at level 4 in language use. They received contact information for five teams—from their own as well as other organisations—that were willing to provide some peer-to-peer coaching. They contacted one of these teams.

Both teams reviewed a set of guidelines for this peer coaching process. The teams met and had a good

Table 1: Six types of practical knowledge

Type	What this is	Examples
Know How	Processes, procedures, techniques, tools to get something done	An operations manual for a Women’s Development Centre A flow of steps required to publish a new Bible translation. Insights gained through evaluation after doing a standard task
Know Why	Strategic insight	A memo of understanding expressing a team’s convictions A vision statement developed by a leadership team Insights gained through group exploration of Scripture related to a key issue in the local context
Know What	Facts required to complete a task	The non-profit accounting regulations for a particular country The assessment of needs in a specific village An inventory of fruitful practices as discerned by field workers
Know Who	Relationships, contacts, networks, whom to call for help	Juan, who seems to know everyone A mentor from a similar team who acts as a coach Agency staff experienced in facilitating grant applications A network of people working in literacy and evangelism
Know Where	Where to get the right information and tools to find that information	Mary, the research librarian An information-rich web portal with a good search engine Informal town leadership who influence the start of new initiatives An email discussion forum or web-based tool giving quick access to experts
Know When	Timing to decide, act, or stop something	A regular time to stop and reflect as a team Schedules for producing new training classes for pastors Team habit of bringing decisions before the Lord in prayer

exchange about language usage as well as about projects they were doing, both gaining encouraging new insights from the session. At the end of their time together, they reviewed how the session had gone, sending feedback to the knowledge stewardship facilitators about how to improve the peer coaching process in the future.

Notice key aspects of this team's experience:

- The questionnaire they used was a practical tool based on research into fruitful practices.
- The evaluation was blame-free, low-tech, and private to the team.
- The team initiated the request for coaching.
- The organisation provided guidelines for the peer coaching process.
- A central group facilitated the "matching" with peer teams. The team made its own selection and arrangements.
- Potential peers came from several agencies.
- Everyone benefitted from this mutual sharing and the process was improved.

Intentionally Learning from Experience

Another team in South Asia settled down for an After Action Review following the recent dedication of an agricultural centre. "What had they expected to happen?" The intention had been to use this dedication as an opportunity to present the Gospel. Chris reviewed the ground rules for an After Action Review, and then asked all the team members to write their evaluations of how the event went.

Then the group discussion began. "What actually happened at the dedication?" After some of the team members shared their observations, Tom (the team leader) spoke up, "I would score the dedication as 8 out of 10. I think almost half the village showed up!" Several others of the Western team members chimed in,

Researchers carefully evaluated the insights of these field workers, using both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques.

also rating the event with high scores for various reasons.

Chris noticed that Abdullah had not spoken and invited him to tell everyone how he rated the event. After a short silence Abdullah said, "I give it a three. Many people came, yes, but this many would come any time they can have free food. The mullah from the mosque openly made fun of the songs; especially the one based on the Lord's Prayer, with the line, "our Father in heaven." Several of the leading men joined him in laughing at the thought of calling Allah our father. People threw away the literature about Isa al Masih that you provided as soon as you were out of sight. It would have been dangerous for them to keep it. Several were offended by the fact that women were mixing with the men at the feast."

In the sobering silence that followed, Chris said, "Thank you, Abdullah, for those honest observations. We really need to listen to your perspective, as you understand how your friends and neighbors think. Now what can we all learn from this? What accounts for these reactions we weren't anticipating?"

Notice key aspects of this team's experience:

- The questions guiding their group evaluation were simple and straightforward: What did we expect? What actually happened? What accounts for the difference? What can we learn from this?
- The evaluation was blame-free, low-tech, and private to the team.
- Viewpoints and observations were valued and drawn out from every member of the team. Different cultural viewpoints were essential.
- The facilitator was not the team leader. This helps lower any awkwardness or fear that

could be associated with team members not agreeing with the team leader's opinions.

- The team conducted the evaluation immediately after the event, while the details were fresh in their minds.

Discerning Fruitful Practices

Knowledge stewardship should be a function not only of local teams, but also of entire organisations, or even partnerships of organisations. These can share knowledge that reveals insights on a macro-level.

In March 2007, a partnership of agencies focused on establishing communities of "Jesus followers" among Muslim people groups gathered for a consultation in order to identify current "Fruitful Practices" in their work.

In preparation, the 19 agencies used internal surveys to identify practices their field teams recognised as contributing to fruitfulness. They compiled the results into one master list. At the consultation 300 field practitioners interacted with this list of fruitful practices via small group discussions, and interviews.

Following the consultation, a team of experienced researchers analysed the information, using qualitative and quantitative techniques. They published the results in the book *From Seed to Fruit* (Woodberry, 2008) and in various journal articles (listed in the bibliography below). In addition, several resources are under development based on this research: an updated list of practices and principles; an assessment tool for field teams and a series of narratives from the field illustrating Fruitful Practices.

Notice key aspects of this consultation:

- Each participating agency developed ways to elicit input from their own members.

- Participants at the event filled in surveys and engaged in small group discussions on key issues involved in church planting among Muslims. The use of interviews enabled the facilitators to capture even more details of the narrative of field efforts.
- Researchers carefully evaluated the insights of these field workers, using both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques, to identify the list of Fruitful Practices.

Who is Responsible?

Who is responsible for stewarding knowledge? Everyone is! It is something all members involved in the vision of an organisation have to do together because each of us has unique insights to offer. Knowledge stewardship requires partnership. Your part depends on the roles you fill in your organisation: in a team, in oversight, in senior leadership. Each role builds on the strengths of others and helps others in their areas of weakness. This is a practical working out of Ephesians 4:16; we are incomplete when someone refrains from contributing his or her part.

Teams understand local conditions, but they can be myopic. Overseers of

teams understand how teams can work together and can encourage continuous improvement, but overseers can miss both the details and the broader vision of the organisation. Those in more senior leadership positions can see wide trends, but they cannot know what is best in a local setting.

While teams do much of the day-to-day stewarding of knowledge on their own, senior leaders have a key role in helping their organisation mature into one that more effectively stewards personal and organisational knowledge. To grow in this way necessitates value judgments about what to focus on next to meet the mission of the organisation, how to understand gaps in performance, and what is required to help their people move forward.

Figure 1 below illustrates how these practices can complement each other.

The Holy Spirit gives supernatural insight into what the Father wants us to learn from our experiences. He also helps leadership develop vision and strategy to lead the organisation and teams into greater fruitfulness. Research into fruitful practices provides a foundation for the approaches used by teams and leadership. Such research can provide a starting point for new teams and a measuring rod for

more experienced teams, giving them access to principles that they adapt for their unique contexts. Insights gained through experience can be available to others via practices such as peer coaching, After Action Reviews (evaluation done in the midst of a project), and retrospective evaluations (used after a project is completed). Some of these insights will be valuable enough to capture for widespread sharing.

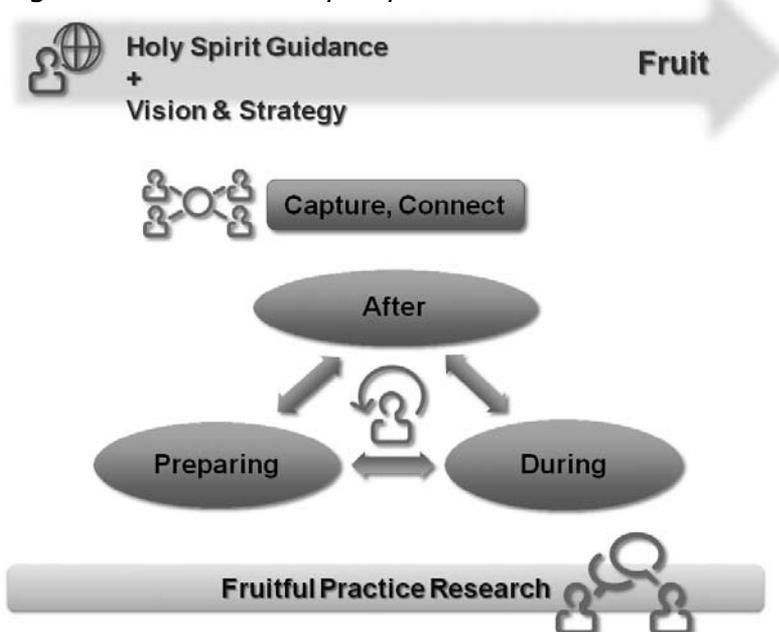
The ideas behind the practice of knowledge stewardship are as old as the book of Proverbs. This type of stewardship is a practical approach to pursuing wisdom, both at the team level and at the organisational level. Stewarding knowledge may seem like common sense, but it is not common practice.

Questions to Consider

- Is your organisation open to learning with and from others? What gets in the way?
- Do people in your organisation believe they can learn continually?
- Do members of your organisation see mistakes as opportunities to learn?
- Where are reflection and sharing already happening among your colleagues?
- Who can help your organisation mature in this?

For more information about knowledge stewardship and its potential for the work of God's kingdom, contact the authors at info@fruitfulpractices.org. **IJFM**

Figure 1: Interrelationship of practices



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