

Stewardship for Managing Societal Challenges

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Abstract: Technological developments have made us live in a complex and constantly changing world. The focus was mainly on a more accessible and better life for individuals, leaving nature and surroundings out of consideration. However, the impact on nature and the environment makes it clear that striving for environmental sustainability is starting to be a bare minimum. Also, the disproportionate impact on marginalised communities is an unintended side-effect. There is increasing emphasis on sustainable practices, conservation of resources, mitigating the effects of climate change, and addressing environmental injustices. Aside from that, mitigating the growing divides in the world requires a different view of our contemporary world. Some of us face increasing anxiety, and others are enthusiastic about the future. It is this future that makes knowledge management play a crucial role in adapting to these new circumstances. Using the existing knowledge based on being proud of the past and, at the same time, being curious and innovative to develop new knowledge to manage unpredictable future events are equally relevant. We recognise that the different settings of change require different types of management styles. Most scientific literature assumes that management is skilled enough to operate well in certainty, while leadership is needed when risk arises. We propagate to integrate the concept of stewardship as a required means in a setting of uncertainty. So far, this concept has gained little attention in knowledge management. Our paper deals with developing skills and competencies for stewardship, managing knowledge to prepare for the unforeseeable futures. In current dynamics, enriched with complexity, it is inevitable to manage knowledge, develop resilience and new skills, respect one another, and build sustainability. Also, new competencies are recognised to manage in current times of change. We combine the paradigms of understanding the different phases of change with the specific types of knowledge management and the competencies required to address the challenges and divides of today. It involves collaboration and shared values among 'We': governments, organisations, communities, and 'Me', individuals to enact meaningful change for 'All', now and in the future.

Keywords: Change, Knowledge Management, Stewardship, Resilience, Sustainability, Competencies

1. Introduction

The never-ending human developments throughout history, have created a complex and constantly changing world, which we all keep adapting to (Beck, 2006; Folke et al., 2002). People react differently to changes. Some of us face growing anxiety, and others are enthusiastic about the future, depending on how confident we are in managing it. Our confidence depends much on how certain we are in the results of change: if we find it a threatening risk for our lives, or if we are completely uncertain about the effects of the changing circumstances, which we are also unsure about (Abcouwer et al., 2022). We face uncertainty independent of how much we try to be prepared for the unknown future and do our best to be knowledgeable (for a description of certain, risk and uncertain see Gigerenzer, 2015). To sustain our equilibrium and present successes, we need several types of skills, knowledge and knowledge management (E. Takács & A. W. Abcouwer, 2020).

In a well-functioning organisation, management is skilled at operating in certainty, where the situation is known, just as the effects of the daily interventions. Leadership is necessary when the equilibrium is disturbed by risks. Stewardship seems to be efficient in uncertain circumstances (Takács et al., 2019). Science studies management and leadership thoroughly, but what is 'stewardship'? Can we develop stewardship? What knowledge, skills and competencies does it require to manage unforeseen events? Managing knowledge, developing resilience and new skills are inevitable in our dynamically changing complex world (E. Takács et al., 2022).

Based on our research activities, we first explain why stewardship is necessary today by analysing the aspects of continuous change, identifying the roles for managing different challenges and the skills to sustain in the future. The diverse theoretical insights with practical recommendations of the European Commission highlight the urgent need to change our attitudes, knowledge management practices, leading to the acknowledgment of the importance of Stewardship for managing societal challenges.

2. Complexity of Challenges and Adapting to Change

Human nature insists on solving the arising problems, but it is becoming clear that the causes we presume for the dynamic societal changes are not manageable on their own. Dealing with challenges one by one only makes us realise the interplay of many underlying issues and cannot reach solutions. As the concept of

intersectionality¹ highlights, no singular problems exist, but they interrelate (Runyan, 2018). The unique dynamics and effects of the intersecting issues create complexity that cannot be solved separately or in a unified way. Understanding complexity by intersectionality helps us to use a broader perspective on knowledge management, while understanding the change process helps managing the challenges more successfully.

The Adaptive Cycle of Resilience (ACoR) model (E. Takács & A. W. Abcouwer, 2020) is based on the dilemma of what we want, must and can do in the given situation (Heene, 2002). The sign of eternity illustrates the ongoing change process starting with an equilibrium, disturbed by challenges, which we need to find new combinations to operationalise so we can reach a new equilibrium. We recognise that in certainty, managers can optimise operations, but when uncertainty arises, creative leaders can support the adaptation to the new circumstances by coming up with new ideas to put in operation and reach certainty again (Takács et al., 2021). These new ideas should be based on new insight and new knowledge that has to be managed carefully.



Figure 1: Developments and the Adaptive Cycle of Resilience (Takács & Abcouwer, 2011)

Change does not stop but evolves. Adaptability and sustainability are crucial challenges for all of us in such a rapidly changing world. We need to deal with the ever-changing societal challenges, and besides adaptivity, different skills, knowledge and attitudes are necessary in the four mentioned stages of change. We identified management, leadership and stewardship as the ones that can handle the challenges successfully.

3. Dealing with Change: Management, Leadership, Stewardship

In the constantly changing environment, different skills, knowledge and attitudes are needed.

In equilibrium (or certainty), managers work well. They know what they want, must and can do to keep the operations balanced. When challenges arise, and we leave our certainty in our abilities (can), we need strengths and faith that we can handle the problem. It certainly requires leadership, just as when we need to find the solution to handle the change. To operationalise and conserve the new ways of working, going concerned is again efficiently manageable with the knowledge and skills of the managers (E. Takács & A W Abcouwer, 2020). But what is Stewardship? When does it play a role in change management and what new requirements for knowledge arise?

Stewardship goes beyond business activities. It also regards organisations' effects on the world around them, looking at values, ethics, and morals. Stewardship guards all resources (time, money, goods and services) with the human responsibility to care for and manage the natural world. Ownership, responsibility, accountability, and reward describe managers and leaders with stewardship (Contrafatto, 2014). They search for solutions to transform ownership, governance, and finance by reconsidering the so-called "truths" accepted by society and redesigning the organisations' operations. They work on adapting to change and sustain while considering all stakeholders: 'Me', the individuals; 'We', the organisations and the groups of individuals; and 'All', the world (Abcouwer & Takács, 2022; Abcouwer et al., 2022). Stewardship changes the focus from 'solving one thing here

¹ According to the concept of intersectionality, different systems, like inequality, are based on multiple forms of discrimination that "intersect" and create unique dynamics and effects.

and now' to a broader and longer perspective thinking, which results in a sustainable present and future for the people (Me), the organisations (We), and our environment (All).



Figure 2: Management-Leadership-Stewardship (Takács et al., 2021)

Managers' concerns work with knowledge transfer because in certainty, it is easy today to find and manage the proper knowledge to handle the problem at stake. In risk and uncertainty, we need the leadership's innovative thinking and courage to solve the arising challenges. Being adaptive requires stewardship to keep answering unknown questions. Shifting to stewardship requires good knowledge management and sensitivity, to be able to get a better understanding of the unknown futures ahead.

A leader who is consciously involved in life-long learning and knowledge management should easily reach stewardship. Those who care for their organisations also pay attention to their people. Knowledge is power, and more and more the value and the primary source for individual and organisational development. We highlighted the importance of knowledge exchange, which is necessary for successful learning and management. The use of information and knowledge is becoming more relevant than its ownership (Brouwers et al., 2022). Experiences built under changing circumstances should focus more on knowledge exchange, although disputes around ownership have increased. Recognising and valuing human capital and building trust and security in the organisation can be a gain for both the individuals and the organisation - and once we recognise the importance of stewardship, - also for the world. Leaving ownership of information and focusing on building new knowledge and practices together leads to questioning and revising accepted (scientific/"true") knowledge sources, which is also characteristic of innovative leaders. To set a favourable environment in the organisation, hierarchy must be changed to trust, cooperation, learning, security, inclusion, equality, flexibility, inspiration, and renewal. Moving the focus to using and interpreting knowledge is a differentiating factor that forms the basis for creating value. Stewardship, backed by wisdom, is conducive to a service mindset. Leadership alone is less likely to invoke cooperation and collaboration. (Dell'Era et al., 2020) In a cooperation, where decision makers share ownership and communicate their interpretations, we explore a new role for the "we" (the organisational value), compared to the traditional orientation where organisations are for fulfilling the shareholders' value or interest.

Stewardship is the careful and responsible management of the things entrusted to our care (Chapin III et al., 2009) a collective work to advance healthy, equitable, sustainable communities describes leaders—both people and organizations—who take responsibility for forming working relationships to drive transformative change in regions and communities (Institute for People Place and Possibility (IP3), n.d.). Importantly, stewards must have a vested interest in promoting an equity orientation regarding purpose, power, and wealth.

Table 1: Differences between Management-Leadership-Stewardship (own source, adaptation of (Lunenburg, 2013))

Category	Management	Leadership	Stewardship
Thinking process	focus on issues looking inward	focus on people looking outward	focus on all the creatures (ecojustice) looking in- and outward

Category	Management	Leadership	Stewardship
Goal setting	executing plans improving the present seeing the trees	articulating a vision creating the future seeing the forest	understanding complexity live in the present with ownership, responsibility and accountability for the future
Employee Relations	controlling subordinates directing and coordinating	empowering colleagues trust and developing	encouraging equality accept, respect and reward
Operations	doing the things right managing change serving super-ordinates	doing the right things creating change serving subordinates	doing as best as can understanding and adapting to change serving the world with all included
Governance	uses authority avoids conflicts acts responsibly	influence uses conflict acts decisively	motivates, encourages respects and accepts responsible and decisive

Can we learn to be a steward? What skills and competencies are needed?

Individuals can serve as stewards to advance community well-being, and stewardship is best accomplished when people work together across differences and sectors to expand the vital conditions that all people and places need to thrive. Stewardship has the most significant impact as a mechanism for shared responsibility and collective action when the work has expanded, aligned with breadth and depth, and, in turn, expanded reach and impact.

4. Skills and Competencies

4.1 EC (2022) European Sustainability Competence Framework

GreenComp (Bianchi et al., 2022) is a reference framework for sustainability competencies. It provides a common ground to learners and guidance to educators, advancing a consensual definition of sustainability as a competence.

It responds to the growing need for people to improve and develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes to live, work and act sustainably. It is designed to support education and training programmes for lifelong learning. It is written for all learners, irrespective of age and education level and in any learning setting – formal, non-formal and informal.

The competencies are grouped around four areas. The competences to

- embody sustainability values
- embrace complexity in sustainability
- envision sustainable futures
- act for sustainability.

These four areas require different kinds of knowledge that must be carefully managed. In the following figure, we describe the areas in more detail to give an indication of what kind of knowledge must be available to embrace the sustainability competencies.



Figure 3: Sustainability competencies (own source, adaptation of the European Sustainability Competence Framework)

Embodying sustainability values require the competences of valuing sustainability, supporting fairness and promoting nature, as humans are part of nature, so should respect the needs and rights of other species and the nature itself to restore and regenerate healthy and resilient ecosystems.

Embracing complexity in sustainability can be achieved by developing the competences of systems thinking, critical thinking with thorough analyses, and framing the current or potential challenges as a sustainability problem in terms of difficulty, involved people, time and geographical scope to identify suitable approaches to anticipating and preventing problems and mitigating and adapting to already existing problems.

Envisioning sustainable futures are very important for youths with their future ahead. Competences as futures literacy for developing alternative scenarios and identifying the steps needed to achieve them, adaptability and creativity, and exploratory thinking can support decision making in complexity and result in novel ideas and methods.

Acting for sustainability with political agencies, collective actions and individual initiatives and potentials for sustainability to actively contribute to improving prospects for the community and the planet.

Sustainability competencies show the individuals' responsibilities ('Me') for their communities ('We') and the environment ('All'). They can help people become systemic and critical thinkers, as well as develop agencies and form a knowledge basis for everyone who cares about our planet's present and future state.

5. The 'Me-We-All' Approach

We recognise that single challenges do not exist, so solving problems one by one will not lead to sustainable solutions. ACoR shows the ever-changing circumstances phase by phase, with skills, competencies, learning and management styles to handle them appropriately. We see how complex it is to live with and manage changes and how vital information management and education are. Like intersectionality, we must consider different aspects and look at problems with a broader view to identify equal opportunities for everyone. When decisions consider all stakeholders, 'Me-We-All', - "*Me*": the People, "*We*": the organisations and "*All*": the society or our environment - they can intersect to reach resilience and sustainability in dynamics. For such abilities besides education, we also need supporting values at these three levels (Schwartz, 2012). Organisational values cannot be the guiding principles, purposes and directions anymore, they are something the members create and shape with the consideration of 'Me-We-All' (Abcouwer & Takács, 2022; Abcouwer et al., 2022).



Figure 4: Changing values (Abcouwer et al., 2022)

When leaders change their values towards ethical and sustainable measures, they find stewardship to deal with the changing circumstances.

- Managers who regard intersectionality will understand differences, and with tolerance, acceptance, and focused education they can decrease any divides, strengthen cooperation of diverse teams, and opt for more creative ways to deal with challenges.
- Appropriate competencies and new methods in education can improve awareness and build trust and engagement in the organisations, leading to better performance at all levels for 'Me-We-All'.
- Sharing and caring can reach economic empowerment to steward the organisation's future.
- Equity, creativity, technology and digital inclusion can contribute to an equitable and more sustainable future.
- Considering Environmental Sustainability is an absolute must. Neither 'Me' nor 'We' or 'All' can survive without it.

Stewardship plays an essential role in this process. For a sustainable present and future, managers and leaders must acquire the ethical values that form the basis for responsible planning and management of resources. Careful and responsible management considers not only the businesses but also the environment and nature, their human capital, their knowledge and information, their culture and diversity. Stewarding the future is motivated beyond economic values. They build the organisation's capacity via education and cooperation to act for 'Me-We-All'. By understanding and making available sources, stewardship helps to create individual (Me) and organisational (We) wealth and contributes to the well-being of the people (Me and We) and the society (All).

Intersectionality (Runyan, 2018) also teaches that differences need to be accepted and included. Offering equal prospects and ways to all is not a solution either. Standard paths served mass production during industrialisation and mechanisation, to provide solutions for living, working, teaching and access to products and services. The answer in stewardship is something completely different. It "re-norms" and changes standards. It is to offer equal outcomes and other paths that can be unique to many people. Caring for individual cases is much more complex, but letting stewardship enter our views gives power, determination and fair opportunities for equal

prospects and outcomes. According to Thomas Sowell (Sowell & Friedman, 1981; Sowell & Weiner, 2010), Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in practice support discriminatory trends because the practical ramifications of the ideology was not thought through, turning the results the other way around. “Undeserved inequalities call for redress”, he says, where the chances for opportunities and success are equal, regardless of educational level, gender or cultural background. Believing that with stewardship, the abilities of individuals can be useful, they can contribute in their own unique way to work out solutions in a diverse problem space. Stewardship facilitates changing Equality to Equity offering everyone choices on accommodating individual differences for equal outcomes. So, not the same shoes for everyone, but shoes that fit the person. Management can ensure equity once they understand the root causes of outcome disparities. Then, they can eliminate barriers to full participation and bring fairness to the procedures and processes. It is also a different approach to striving for diversity. A sustainable society for everyone requires acceptance, trust and a broader view of reality than only for the privileged ones.

Equity (Minow, 2021; Sowell, 2001), referring to the common stock of the organisations, brings ownership and intellectual property in sight. For sustainability, as the world’s ability to host our successors, managers and leaders should not limit themselves to traditional certainties, like intellectual property, value and ownership (Van den Broek et al., 2023). Such open-minded, careful and attentive stewardship will base cooperation in front. Instead of owning solutions, members of diverse teams contribute to results with their abilities, competencies and equal opportunities (Takács & Abcouwer, 2023).

6. Developing Stewardship for Managing Present Societal Challenges for a Liveable Future

Education plays a crucial role in shielding children and youth with sustainability competencies so they can be responsible stewards in organisations, that care for future generations (E. k. Takács et al., 2022).

Changing school cultures and developing school leadership teams is the first action to take (Hahn, 2021). Understanding the nature of change and the need for adaptivity can support the development of management, leadership and stewardship skills, competencies and attitudes (Takács & Abcouwer, 2021).

This understanding is very important not just for schools which develop future leaders, but also for organisations, which are already responsible for managing change in a way that does not harm any individuals, society, or the world. Being aware of the differences between Management, Leadership and Stewardship, understanding the role of motivation can ensure sustainable change management for organisations (Abcouwer et al., 2021).

The European Sustainability Competence Framework (Bianchi et al., 2022) can guide school leaders and organisational managers to embody sustainability values, embrace complexity in sustainability, envision sustainable futures, and act for sustainability. On all these issues, knowledge must be available to be able to support decision-making on these fields (E. Takács & A. W. Abcouwer, 2020). We find that a change must happen both in school cultures and organisational cultures when we want to ensure futures for the people (Me), organisations (We) and the Earth (All). The need for different types of knowledge is apparent for understanding the challenges we will face in future (E. Takács & A W Abcouwer, 2020). Our paper wished to provide a basic understanding of such a change with some helpful insights and instructions.

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