Book Review: Stewards of a Sacred Trust

by Carrie Cavanaugh

Stewards of a Sacred Trust: CEO Selection, Transition and Development for Boards of Christ-centered Organizations by David McKenna is a book grounded in theological insight, that is then worked out to its practical implementation. Chapter by chapter, McKenna works systematically through all the stages involved in the selection of a new CEO from "Profiling the Leader" to "Measuring Wholeness." It is clear that McKenna is writing from experience because he is careful to point out not only the things that are easy to forget, but also extra opportunities for your ministry's growth along the way. Despite his expertise in the field, McKenna retains a sincere humility, at one point admitting that it's only been since he's retired that he's taken the time to more fully think through the spiritual implications of this important process.

David McKenna holds a B.A. in History from Western Michigan University, an M. Div. from Asbury Theological Seminary, and an M.A. in Counseling Psychology and Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of Michigan. He has served as the president of Spring Arbor College, Seattle Pacific University and Asbury Theological Seminary. He also served as the founding chair of the Christian College Consortium (parent organization of the Council of Christian College & Universities). Additionally, he is ordained in the Free Methodist Church and has served as Vice President of the World Methodist Council. Finally, he was consulting editor for Christianity Today. This is his 32nd book and it is clearly the fruit his education and years of experience he has as a leader within the world of Christian organizations.

As the title attests, the underlying theme of the book is that the board's job of selecting a new CEO is one that has spiritual implications—it is a task entrusted to those whom God has placed in roles of oversight of His kingdom work. McKenna sees the Christian organization as driven by, "the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Word of God and enacted through the agency of the Holy Spirit … from the inside out. Seen in its vision, stated in its mission, and felt in its tone, the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ defines its identity and shapes its character." Make no mistake, McKenna is the consummate professional, but he is also sincere in his faith and this only adds to the diligence with which he addresses this task.

This high calling is played out in practical ways. McKenna describes the role of the board: "An effective board balances between being an engineer and an artist. The engineer's eye is on the details that must be addressed. At the same time, the artist's eye is on the big picture that can never be forgotten." This balanced approach is upheld throughout the book as McKenna addresses both the overarching issues as well as the details needed to actually put his ideas into action. Since most of us are better at one or the other, this book is a real asset in the balance it brings.

McKenna is good about painting a picture of what a board/CEO relationship should ideally be, but he also takes time to address common problems. He explains, "All organizations have some of the characteristics of a family, and the Christ-centered organization is best understood using that model. As we remember from Tolstoy's

opening line of Anna Karenina, 'All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhealthy in its own way.'" One of the tools that he suggests to address issues in an organization is a professional survey such as the Best Christian Workplaces survey, which "identifies where the organization is comparatively weak or strong on relational as well as operational measures." Later McKenna warns that "the fact is that the discipline of assessment may be more important in good times because it may be too late in bad times." Thus, he encourages the board to regularly utilize outside evaluation even if there is no apparent problem.

McKenna also address current trends for CEOs and examines their implications,

> In recent years, we have seen CEO compensation go through the roof with salaries, options, benefits, incentives, and perks. This is 'throw-away leadership' at it's worst. Christ-centered organizations have not been exempt from the influence. In a radical reversal from times past when we kept our CEOs poor to keep them pure, some Christ-centered organizations have adopted the corporate mentality for excessive executive compensation. Someplace along the line, the sense of call and commitment gets lost, especially when lower levels of staff are working at sacrifice, even on survival margins.

As with all the issues he addresses in the book, McKenna concludes his chapter with a "With All Due Diligence" checklist that helps board members think through the process, gives practical step-by-step guidance and points out additional opportunities along the way.

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McKenna notes that while most of the CEO's work is expected and routine, there will inevitably arise a moral crisis. He breaks these down into four categories:

1. *unexpected circumstances* that are also unprecedented.
2. *Personal conflict* that is emotionally intense.
3. *Moral choice* that is neither black nor white.
4. *Long-term consequences* that determine the destiny of leadership.

These situations will stretch the bond of trust between the board and the CEO, but it is vital that the CEO know that the board stands behind him. Even if he should fail, it should be viewed as on-the-job learning—this is the "white-hot crucible in which leaders are refined by fire and shaped for service."

It's hard for a book to succeed at being both practical and inspiring, but Stewards of a Sacred Trust manages to do both.