



# What Do Stewards Believe, Know, and Do?

## A Primer on Essential Stewardship Practices

### What We Believe: Our Values and Worldviews

**We can thrive together:** We all share an aspiration to become thriving people in a thriving world. When we translate that aspiration into action, it becomes a commitment to create communities where all people have a fair chance to participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Our best hope to realize a resilient and vibrant America for generations to come is to organize local and nationwide action around a single unifying and measurable expectation: *All people and places thriving together—no exceptions.*

**Justice makes us all stronger:** When large numbers of us are struggling, suffering, and experiencing unfair burdens, it frays our national fabric of justice and stability. We reject structural racism and all forms of social exclusion as toxic forces that destroy lives and dehumanize us all. We celebrate human differences and diverse cultures as strengths, not liabilities, when trying to thrive together in a rapidly changing world.

**We can join each other in shared stewardship:** Ordinary people in every walk of life, along with organizations in every sector or industry, can move into meaningful roles as shared stewards of well-being and justice. Stewards are people and organizations who work with others to create the conditions that everyone needs to thrive together, beginning with those who are struggling and suffering. That is how we co-create a society in which everyone can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.

### What We Know About Thriving Together

**Without vital conditions, it is not possible to thrive:** Vital conditions are properties of places and institutions that we all need all the time to reach our full potential, like humane housing, access to meaningful work and wealth, and a sense of belonging. When those vital conditions are absent or impaired, people tend to struggle and suffer, driving demand for urgent services. Urgent services are essential, but they are temporary fixes that don't address broader, long-term conditions that are needed to thrive—we cannot “urgent service” our way to thriving.

**Without reckoning with ever-present legacies of justice and injustice, it is not possible to thrive together:** We have inherited legacies that confer dignity and foster resilience. We have also inherited legacies that dehumanize, exclude, and inflict trauma. The decisions we make today will shape the legacies that we pass on to future generations.

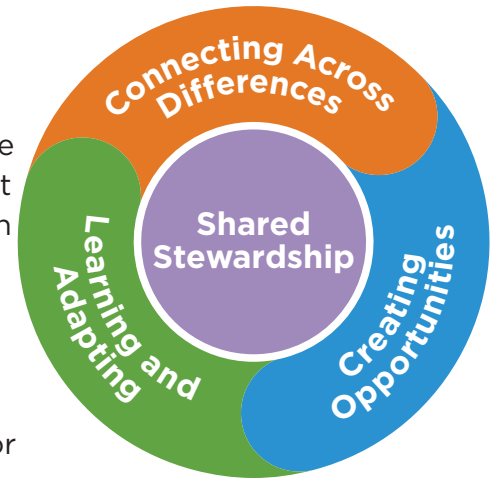
**Without expanding *belonging and civic muscle*, we cannot work across differences as *shared stewards of the systems that shape our lives*:** Lasting change across the country depends on everyone feeling like an important part of a community, contributing to its vibrancy, and developing the power to co-create a common world. Building [belonging and civic muscle](#) strengthens social ties, increasing trust and cooperation, making it easier to work together. This creates a virtuous cycle: When people feel valued and cared for within the community, they are more likely to contribute and participate in creating healthy, equitable places.

## What We Do: Essential Stewardship Practices

There is nothing newfangled or technical about what stewards do, and they don't rely only on experts with special knowledge to guide the way. Instead, their practices are based on age-old concepts that have enabled communities and cultures around the world to sustain legacies for living together over centuries.

We intentionally depict the practices in a circle because stewards hardly ever pursue them in a linear path. Changes in one practice often cascade into shifts and insights elsewhere. Most stewards are already strong in some practices, while others need improvement or are new frontiers altogether.

There are countless practices that stewards enact in their quest toward thriving together. These practices rise to the level of being essential because of their unique power to support and generate lasting change in any setting. The practices group into three patterns that stewards everywhere can deepen to drive progress toward everyone thriving together, no exceptions:



### Connecting Across Differences

Stewardship is not a solo act, and it becomes increasingly powerful as more people and organizations are drawn into the work together.

### Creating Opportunities

Our progress depends on actively breaking from the status quo by continually creating opportunities for a different future to take hold.

### Learning and Adapting

Our world is constantly changing; adaptive approaches will help us to move forward together, even in the face of uncertainty.

## STEWARDSHIP PRACTICES

### Connecting Across Differences

- a. **Weave Vested Interests:** Actively seek to understand the values and priorities of others. Emphasize curiosity, vulnerability, and deliberative dialogue in shaping a way forward.
- b. **Value Unheard Voices:** Develop authentic working relationships with residents. Ensure that all change efforts are done *with*, not *to* those they are meant to support.
- c. **Earn Trust:** Prioritize transparency through continual, authentic communication. Repair harm through honesty and reconciliation. Build and honor mechanisms for mutual accountability.
- d. **Strengthen Interdependence:** Distinguish the unique contribution that each steward can make. Create just enough structure for ongoing and emergent forms of collaboration. Nurture alignment.
- e. **Build Shared Power:** Build capacity, energy, and power for shared action across individuals and institutions. Draw others into stewardship and help them to deepen their practice so it becomes the de-facto way of working together.

### Creating Transformative Opportunities

- f. **Expand Aspirations:** See the “whole system,” not just isolated pieces. Orient all strategies toward the north star of thriving together.
- g. **Change the Story:** Cultivate stories of hope, shared humanity, and mutual strength. Change expectations about what is possible.
- h. **Commit to Multisolving:** Choose solutions that advance multiple goals at once, are mutually reinforcing, and have many co-benefits.
- i. **Bridge Timescales:** Work over the short and long term simultaneously. Appreciate the decades-long nature of the work at hand and the need to make decisions now that bring a different future to life.
- j. **Align Investments:** Align financial incentives with community health and well-being. Develop and support funding sources and financing mechanisms that align organizational interests with broader goals for thriving together.

### Learning and Adapting

- k. **Embrace Complexity:** Appreciate that the work of social change is messy, unpredictable, and always evolving. Cultivate comfort with the unknown.
- l. **Promote Abundance:** Eschew zero-sum thinking. See tensions and differences as opportunities to create new understanding and possibility. Solve problems by being creative with existing resources, rather than first seeking more resources.
- m. **Habituate Action Learning:** Create a culture of continuous shared learning. Integrate multiple points of view along the way. Regularly adapt to new information and perspectives. Minimize risk by testing small-scale prototypes.
- n. **Consider Legacies Past and Future:** Explore positive and negative legacies with candor. Articulate those that need to be left in the past and those that need to emerge to create a different future.
- o. **Use Data to Chart Progress:** Actively find ways to share and integrate data. Use that data to support coordination and track shared progress towards the north star of thriving together and the path for getting there.

## How Were the Essential Stewardship Practices Developed?

This collection of essential practices began with an [initial version](#) in 2016, developed with insights from the ReThink Health [Ventures project](#). The current collection encompasses refinements based on a [trio of action learning projects](#) from 2018-2022, reactions from thousands of colleagues across the country, as well as comparisons with more than a dozen similar summaries of approaches for stewarding the systems that shape our lives together. It reflects our best current understanding, yet remains open to evolve.

We have also created an accompanying [Stewardship Practices Assessment](#) to help changemakers identify strengths and areas for improvement for individuals, organizations, and networks in their journey to become better stewards of an equitable, thriving future. Results from prior similar assessments were used in the implementation and evaluation of our [Hospital Systems in Transition](#) and [Portfolio Design for Healthier Regions](#) projects.

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