
A 20-MINUTE READ ABOUT OWNERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

Owner's Manual




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Eating with Pearl

I'm eating my Keto-friendly ice cream in the beautiful Florida sunshine. It's a perfect 72 degrees with no clouds or bugs in sight. It's incredibly peaceful, aside from Nicholas Cage yelling crazy things in the background on Netflix while I jot down a few notes between bites. The ice cream is Rebel's Triple Chocolate Chunk, by the way. My favorite! (The name is a fav too - Rebel - like they made it just for me.) I've been in this carpool line 20 minutes already but it's been productive and even fueled my thinking.

I couldn't do it without Pearl, the Tessy.

Pearl is what my wife named the Tesla Model 3 she bought.

I'm now an unofficial but proud ambassador for Tesla—I think everyone should own one.

It's the nicest car we've ever owned. It's a total blessing and I definitely wash it and care for it like one.

Loren earned a car allowance months ago through her business and decided the new car should be mine. I wasn't going to argue with that generous logic.

When she earned it, we didn't want to jump in emotionally and strap ourselves to something that would increase our expenses from insurance, gas, and maintenance. Emotional decisions based on what looks best in an Instagram photo can lead to trouble offline. We didn't want that to be our story. So after months of consideration, research, patience, and more discipline, we decided on the car and knew it was what we both wanted and needed (yes, you can need a certain type of car).

That's when the work started.

We went to the mall to pick it out. (That sentence sounds funny but I love that we've progressed to the point when buying a car at the mall is normal-ish.)

Before we walked in I said "Let's not get emotional. If it's good, it's good. If not, we move on. We're getting a car, the car isn't getting us." We asked all the questions, sat in all the models, looked at all the colors, discussed all the options, asked the same questions again, even inspected our own intentions. But once we made the decision, we gave Jesse, our excellent Tesla agent, the \$100 deposit and went home excited. We owned a new car. We just had to wait a few weeks until it came in.

Simple.

Buying that Tesla was possibly the easiest way to own something. A little walk around the mall, a \$100 deposit, bada bing bada boom, it's done.

Problem is, we think ownership is that simple in ministry. As if volunteers show up to serve like going to the mall and buying a Tesla.

But as I've seen in hundreds of churches, there's nothing that simple about ownership.

Even buying a Tesla wasn't that easy.

We had to pull together for the bank and the dealer all sorts of things: multiple proofs of income, multiple bank statements, proofs of identification, proof of residence, and insurance coverage. I had to speak to the bank, the insurance guy, the dealer, the dealer's boss, the banker's boss, and one time even set up a talk between them.

When you finally get all that done and get to the delivery date, there are more signatures, more reading, an inspection to make sure the car is as it should be, and the transfer of title and keys. Seriously, how is it that I had to sign more papers for a Tesla than I did to have a baby? What the heck?! Anyway, to top it off, we're now driving a "supercomputer wrapped in a car" that's dramatically different from all the rest so we even needed an intro on how to start this car. (Which, by the way, it doesn't start, it just goes!)

And if the easiest car buying experience on the market is actually nuanced and complicated, how much more difficult is the nature of ownership when it comes to leading a world-changing church?



The Privilege of Ownership

It's a burden and a blessing.

I'm grateful. The car is amazing. God's provision is welcomed. We love the car!

Don't hear my description of the car-buying process as an unwelcome burden. Ownership is a huge privilege.

The burden of ownership is far better than the absence of ownership. I'd rather struggle with something of value than live a life void of any substantive weight.

I often hear from church leaders - particularly lead pastors and senior management teams - that there's a *"gap in ownership."* Or *"My team just doesn't seem to own the vision like I want them to."* Or *"Our people just won't __."*

It seems as though doing the tasks of church has been mistaken for ownership of the mission and vision of the church. I do think ownership can be perceived and measured by some tasks (and we'll get to that). But it's more nuanced than that.

What I'm astutely aware of more than ever, though, is that taking ownership is a process. It's not just an idea or hope for a team to simply "get it." And it's definitely more than a talking point in a sermon on culture.

Let's walk through four layers of ownership and see if we can identify where the gaps may have started for your teams.



A Personal Connection

When I go to make a purchase, a personal connection exists before anything. I want it. I need it. I think it will impact my life in a positive way. Or maybe it's something that will help me achieve what I need to achieve. But however you slice it, **ownership starts with a personal connection.**

Ownership in church is no different. There's a personal connection people have to your church, the mission, or even just the leaders there. The connection, no matter what it is, is substantial. It brings them to church, it moves them to click on a video, or to comment on a post.

For the sake of time I'm going to trust you understand the personal connection. It's perhaps the easiest, most passive element of ownership. You have people at the church, you have people on the teams.

Your problem is that you can't get them to own it.

In the church leadership world, we speak plenty about the desire for ownership among our teams. And we spend equal time requesting the proof of ownership. But practically walking people through a process that helps them become an owner and describe what that means, that's far less discussed if even understood to begin with.

I understand why. It's hard work. And just like selling cars or coffee, it's never going to be as personal if you only provide a copy-and-paste process for the masses.

It's not effectively done to large groups or over email. **It can't be personal if it's not custom.**

Translation: You can't expect someone to own the mission if you don't establish a personal connection where vision can be deposited.

Ownership must move from a theory or broad statement to a practical achievement. I've heard someone simply state "*Don't be a renter*" as if that were inspiring, motivational, or even remotely clear. Many people rent not necessarily because it's more affordable, but because they don't understand the process of buying a home.

In my church experience it seems common to overlook the process and go straight to wanting proof of ownership—more volunteers, more buy-in, and more mind-reading what the leader may or may not want. .

We obsess over the proof of ownership. We need to obsess over the process, because it's the process that moves people.



The Process of Acquisition

In our society we want immediate gratification. But heating up popcorn in the microwave still takes a process. Even the instant world of online shopping requires a process. A “quick trip” to Walmart requires a process and is literally never “quick.” Grabbing coffee in a drive-through takes extra time and steps these days.



Ownership, of any kind,
takes effort.

We all know it's easy to see something, like it, dream about it, talk about it, and even put a date on the calendar to get it. **But the effort is in the acquisition.** It's in the process of taking ownership that you expend an energy you didn't think about.



Ownership



Ownership costs something!

If we are going to develop leaders who own the vision, we need to develop leaders who are willing to spend for the vision. In other words, what's the cost they're willing to pay for the mission we're going to pursue?

Just as we did with the car, there's a list of things we'll need in order to transfer ownership, because ownership costs something.

- **How about a reminder to the people that this mission we're on together requires contribution.** It may not always be financial but it will certainly require energy, time, and commitment. Maybe you've heard a team member express preferences about where to sit, what to eat, and who they have to serve with. Maybe you've seen a team member show up late, coffee in hand, question a new initiative, then leave early. That's not an owner. You know it because you've thought, "What have you even done?" You can tell an owner by their contribution more than their commentary. Because owners aren't entitled, they're entrusted. They carry responsibility and have things to steward. Things like their time, their encouragement, and their care. These are things they give as owners of a mission.
- **How about a reasonable expectation of a commitment?**

Ownership of anything is a long-term prospect. It's not about celebrating sign-ups and interest. It's about showing up regularly with the same discipline, excitement, and expectation.

Honestly, I'm surprised at how often churches like to celebrate sign-ups then act surprised when retention drops off a cliff six weeks later. You replicate what you celebrate. Stop celebrating interest and reinforce the value of long-term investment in the team, the initiative, and the church. Owners expect a commitment. Only the entitled waste a privilege.

- **It's well within reason to set basic qualifications for ownership of a particular part of the ministry.** Could be age for certain roles, gender for some ministries, educational qualifications, and even background checks. Communicating these to team members helps transfer the understanding of the weight of what we're doing together. There are phenomenal leaders in your church right now who won't serve without the presence of qualifications. The bar is so low or even invisible that potential owners aren't drawn to be a part. Even worse, there are probably some qualifications that aren't being inspected so the culture of excellence and accountability is running off people who want to be called higher.

We could spend more time extending this list well into the dozens of requirements depending on the ministry details, church size, specific mission, and more. But you get the idea. Generally everyone reading this has purchased something and been through a similar process.

So why is it hard to connect these dots to the concept of ownership in our churches and among our teams?

Well for one, we live in a world of immediate gratification and in-your-face impact. If you can't see it, it must not be real. If you can't get it right now, it must not be worth it. This, of course, is nearly the exact opposite of what the apostle Paul writes in Galatians 6:9: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

If you don't set expectations then you can't grade on those expectations,

which allows people to be as flaky as they'd like and there's not much you can do about it other than complain. And since complaining is symptomatic, it's a good indication that ownership may be leaking. Funny enough, many would rather start down that road than backtrack to the origin and solve the root of the problem.

The most fascinating part to me is that most of this is subconscious.

If you have a church history similar to mine, you've seen your fair share of disgruntled church members

or angry team members who feel entitled to authority or resource, and you've seen that take its toll on the leaders. That grinds on you for months or years. **And eventually you learn more phrases for excusing the trend instead of breaking the curse and building the right culture from the beginning.**

Let's break it down more.

What can you do right now to outline and work through the process of acquisition? What can you do to move the ownership of the ministry from your "dealer lot" to the personal space of the new owners - aka your teams?

Write out, **What is available to own?** It must be objective and measurable. "Culture" isn't the answer.

But what is owned is what makes up that culture - the beliefs, the behaviors, and the desired outcomes. You can own a team and subsequent responsibilities, an environment, language specific to the ministry, policies and procedures, a defined level of excellence, and much more. But you must ask yourself, "What is it that I specifically want people to own?" And then get real with yourself by asking, "Is this objective, and is this measurable?"

The first thing you complain about in your organization is likely the first area where you can model the Process of Acquisition—own it within yourself or it will never be owned in your church.





that you want people to own?

"People don't show up on time."

You want them to own the preparation, expectation, and urgency that comes with being a part of the team.

"Service keeps going long." You want them to own the time management and preparation required to communicate efficiently yet effectively.

"Parking cones aren't straight." You want them to own the same eye of detail you have.

"Volunteers talk to each other instead to VIPs." You want them to own the spirit of connection you preach about and advertise as a church to your community.

"Staff don't pick up trash when they see it."

"Our people just don't invite their friends to church!"

"A staff won't think high enough."

The list goes on and on.

THE PRIVILEGE OF OWNERSHIP

Here's the ugly truth.

People can't own what's just on loan.

I've written about this in more than a time or two on Instagram, but **I think a disproportionate number of leaders lead people as if they're project managers instead of owners.** We give them a group to manage, not a team to lead. We give them a task to do instead of authority to create.

You can change that right now. Turn your frustrations of a perceived lack of ownership into the indicators required to know where to hand ownership over to someone.

- ✓ Write down and describe in a meeting the expected contribution. This is what it means to "own it." Maybe it's expecting your leaders to arrive first or even just on time. Or expecting your leaders to tithe. Or expecting your staff to attend 90% of church events. Don't assume, write it out.
- ✓ Write out the expected commitment. Is this a three month volunteer opportunity? Is it two hours on Saturday? How soon should a leader replace themselves?
- ✓ Write out any baseline qualifications of ownership. Age, experience, talent?
- ✓ Transfer the title. This could be literally giving someone a title. It could be a short ceremony to install a leader on a new team. It could be publicizing a roster of new team members to welcome them. Transfer of ownership is not hypothetical. It's clear, it's visible, it's audible.

Chances are many churches haven't done what we just outlined here. So I'm hoping that we've already begun to change the game for you. The above list is not exhaustive but intended to get you thinking. Don't rush through this. Don't check some boxes and call it quits.

Shortcuts are not sturdy.

“Build with intention and determination and you’ll have more of the culture you want and the results you need to accomplish what you’re called to do.”

Once you work through the hard part of ownership, the uncomfortable part begins. And in my experience it’s more uncomfortable for you, the leader, than it is for the team.

The process takes diligence and effort. But the next part requires a unique emotional output.



The Proof of Ownership

(Now I know I bad mouthed the proof earlier, but the proof is important, after you've been through the process.)

I've rented over 300 cars in my lifetime as I've traveled the world for fun and work. Some of them were sports cars I could never afford to own. Some were small trucks I'd never want to own. The common thread among every single one of these rentals is that I never once washed one before I returned it. I bet you've never done that either.

People don't wash rental cars. They don't own them. Why would you spend a dime more of your money and a minute more of your energy to care for what you don't own? If you did I might even question your stewardship.

I can drive around my neighborhood and tell what cars are owned, what cars are rented, and even what cars were simply given to the driver by a friend or family member. The owners almost always have the cleanest and most well maintained cars. My neighbors know about our new car too because I've hand washed it four times in the month I've owned it.

By now you've probably lined up this analogy with team ownership.



You can tell who's an owner and who's a renter by their care, consistency, and commitment.

And while stopping at the recognition would be amazing and simple, it's incomplete to do so.

As leaders we're not babysitters but stewards of our resources and that includes the human resources on the team and even subsequently who and what they steward. We have to inspect what we expect. From new parents all the way up to CEOs, accountability is part of the role as a leader.

I evaluate ownership through the following three lenses. There could be others. This is not an exhaustive list. I'd even be interested to know what other lenses through which you might evaluate ownership. [Schedule a call with me and let's discuss further.](#)

Care – You can hear it.

Owners say certain things and in certain ways. It sounds like *“Turn your light off on the way out.”* Did your dad say that? Do you say that? As the owner of a home I use a lot of extra words like this every day in order to save money and maintain a comfortable, safe, fun home for my family. Maybe it sounds like *“Have my daughter back by 10.”* Or *“Take it slow, I just bought it.”* Think of all the things you say as an owner that you don’t find yourself saying about things that aren’t yours.

In church it’s the same. Owners of the vision and mission might say *“Let’s set up the tables this way to best serve our guests.”* Or *“Look over the parking lot for any potential safety hazards.”*

My favorite indication of care is when someone can defend the vision and operations of their church and pastor. Owners don’t let people gossip about their leader, the family, or their house. Owners don’t sit idle when someone has a questioning spirit about how or why a church does a particular thing. (A question is ok, a questioning spirit is not. Knowing the difference could fill an entirely different ebook. Maybe one day.)

Owners have a deeper understanding of the vision of the church, why things are done certain ways, and how things came to be. Owners can quickly rattle off anecdotes of connections that have come from seemingly small details about how they do church. Owners have Scripture parallels and inspiration behind why things are done a particular way.

**Owners care. And care is communicated.
You can hear it.**



Practically I might measure an owner’s care by asking a few questions about them.

- What do their teams say about their attitude?
- What do their teams say is most important to them? And how have they heard the leader reinforce that?
- Do I hear solutions from this person? Or only problems?
- Do I hear encouragement from them?
- Experienced leaders know you can encourage someone into lasting change better and faster than critiquing them into change.

“But Swebb, how do I make them care?”

Well first, don’t install any more leaders into roles if they’re not owners. Don’t make the same mistake twice. Then moving forward I’d first ask you: Have you been a good example? What do you sound like? Do you have a reputation of caring for your team and their place on the mission? Or just caring that tasks get done? By the way, care isn’t just full of soft language or added hugs. You can care loudly, repetitively, and urgently ... with love for the people and high hopes for their place in the story. Re-read this section from a place of reflection. Start there.



Consistency - You can see it.

An owner is always present. Even if not physically, you can perceive the wake of their consistency. Consistency is in the patterns they produce in and through their teams. It's in the example they set by arriving early and staying late. It's seen in their rhythms of setup and teardown, in their rhythms of follow-up, in their rhythms of encouragement. It's seen on their face when they smile even on the bad days, cold days, long days, or hot days. It's seen in the increased energy their teams receive from their presence.

Rarely will a consistent leader produce an inconsistent team. And vice versa, an inconsistent leader almost never produces a consistent team. Look in the mirror!

Owners have an energy and focus uncommon to the rest of the world because they know both the cost and the goal. They gave something substantial on the front end in hopes and with intention of achieving something substantial on the back end. That clarity of the mission fuels them to complete even the mundane tasks and processes in between the start and the win. That's consistency.

Before I mention a few practical thoughts it's worth a mention that consistency isn't the same as monotony. There is a ton of room for creativity and innovation inside the scope of consistency. Just like a quarterback in football, there are many creative ways to execute a play while still being consistent in the endeavor to win within the parameters of the game.



I might evaluate a leader's consistency by asking these things:

- Are you changing your ministry to accomplish the mission, or are you changing the mission because you just want a "successful" ministry?
- What kind of turnover does this leader produce within their own teams?
- Can a team easily communicate the vision when the leader is away on vacation?
- What defines your team, real productivity, or just ministry activity?

"But Swebb, how do I get people to be consistent."

What example are you setting? Do people know what consistency looks like in your context? Is it possible you're changing direction and instructions too often and that's causing their inconsistency?

I find when a win is clarified, parameters are communicated, and passions are leveraged, consistency is a byproduct.

We all like to win again and again. Even more so when we are the chief contributors to the win.



Commitment – you can feel it.

Everytime we leave the house I have one main job: I circle the house in a predictable counter-clockwise flow to turn off all the lights in the house. My daughter leaves on her big light, desk lamp, bathroom light, and even her music playing nearly every time we go somewhere. As the owner I know those expenses add up. Because

owners chase pennies.

Commitment to maximizing potential isn't sporadic or spontaneous. It's not always fun and equally productive day after day. So here's how I define commitment:

Commitment is driving to completion.

Maybe that last line just clarified for you the reason your teams may have gaps in their ownership. Maybe they can't see the goal or don't even know what a win looks like in their role or ministry. People can't care or be consistent without clarity.

- Have you spelled out what a good guest experience looks like? I mean the details, not vague theories. The Guest Experience teams are to execute a good experience for the guests. I know that sounds obvious when it's written out but we've all seen teams with names that don't line up with what they're producing.
- Have you articulated what a prayer of salvation should sound like or include?
- Have you written out specific policies and procedures for your kids ministry to follow?
- Is the parking team just for putting cars in spaces or are they your front-line, first impression greeters? Because I assure you they're the latter but if you only see them as the former you've already lowered the bar of excellence for your guest experience.

With their care and consistency, we can feel commitment from our leaders. It's often indescribable but nearly always remarkable.

It's proven in statements like "He just knows how to get more from his team." Or "She has the deepest bench of any of our teams here." Or even "She seems to lead the team that best displays our values as a church."

This is what people mean when they say "I want a vibe like that!"

Commitment to maximizing potential will show most through the people a leader leads. You'll eventually hear it from the team and see it in them as well.

That's the point.

Do you have a leader who produces more like them or even better? Then they're committed to maximizing the potential and you can feel it, can't you?

"Great, Swebb, now I know what to look for but how do I build a committed maximizer?"

For more on how to be a multiplier or build multipliers, well, that's a conversation for another time. This eBook is specifically intended to help us identify and work towards ownership.

In the meantime I'd recommend [Multipliers by Liz Wiseman.](#)

For a more in depth conversation around any of the elements in this chapter, or the rest of the book, [reach out to me](#) and let's solve problems and maximize potential at a custom level; solutions built just for your leadership and your context.

The Practice of Accountability

Threaten people. That seems to work.

Kidding! That doesn't work any more now than when your mom threatened "to pull this car over and wear you out." If your mom was the one mom in the world to do that then congratulations, you're better for it. But for parents like me who have empty threats and kids who can be brats sometimes as a result, we know threats are laughable.

Here's the thing, accountability is the key to building leaders and maintaining ownership.

Accountability seems to be a hard thing these days. Even a bad word in some churches. It's as if grace and mercy are words used as shields for laziness and apathy instead of for correction and restoration.

Funny, too, since 2 Timothy 3:16 says the Bible is useful for correction—constantly making us better even at the expense of our feelings.

If there were no repercussions for not paying your car payment, I'm not certain many people would make their payments. I'd have to give it a second thought myself if payments were just a suggestion. Just being honest. :)

But accountability gets a bad rep in churches because it feels negative at times. But here's the thing, a bank holds you accountable to make car payments. It doesn't want to repossess your car, but it will if it has to. The best thing for you, and the bank, is for the owner to be the owner (you) and the bank be the bank.

In the same way, it's best for your teams to own the mission and vision and for the leaders to fuel that mission with vision, resources, and encouragement to keep going.



That culture says emphatically “We take this seriously.” It’s not that we love the mission over the person. But we also don’t love the person at the cost of the mission. The person is the mission. They’re mutually dependent.

What isn’t connected to the mission is a person’s role on an org chart. That can always change. We need to love the person enough to remove them from a position if that’s one of the things slowing their growth or negatively affecting the organization’s impact. And that’s my point here, are you even willing to change things in order to get better?

In some cases, removing someone who lacks ownership is the missing piece to helping others gain ownership.

Do your teams know that? Are you ok with mediocre work for an eternal purpose or do you keep the bar high?

That’s felt and seen more than heard. And it comes from the leader.

- Set and state clear standards for the work. You don’t need to state specific tasks, that’s the team’s job.
- Give some clarity on how something should feel or what emotions a project should elicit. This paints a more colorful picture and stirs more creativity in the teams. This is better up front than telling them to “Go figure it out” then have a boat load of critique on the back end when they didn’t hit your ambiguous moving target.
- Set clear timelines and stick to them.
- Write out and discuss clear next-steps after meetings.
- Follow up if you say you’re going to follow up.
- Set reminders in your phone and on your calendar to check in at appropriate intervals.
- Don’t settle for mediocre work just because “they worked hard on it.” **Excellence is doing all that you can with all that you have.** It’s not “pretty good but I know you have dinner plans so we’ll just go with it.”



Set a standard and hold to a standard. Or you don't have standards.

I imagine some are thinking that all this might sound mean and overbearing but it's not. "Mean and overbearing" are descriptives for a person, not a culture. High standards are welcomed and appreciated in industries and teams worldwide. The delivery from the leader and consistency seen in the leader are what determine how it's received.

I heard Andy Stanley say long ago, "The more comfortable a leader is holding his team accountable, the less likely he'll be asked to do so."

Knowing accountability is a practice and not just a principle is what makes and keeps an intentional culture strong.

How do you know you're building a culture of accountability if you've never removed someone from a position? The leader has to hold people

accountable, not just talk about the idea of accountability. The strength is in the "hold."

I'm not a personal fan of confrontation. I imagine a few friends reading this may have just spit out their coffee. After all, I'm an 8 on the enneagram. I'm supposed to be confrontational, right? Actually no. I'm also a wing-9 on that same scale. Unnecessary confrontation isn't fun to me. And even necessary confrontation isn't fun to me as much as it is essential. And that's what I'm saying here: It's essential to protect what you project. If you say you want a certain culture then protect it.

If you expect a particular value to be reinforced then inspect that value.

The hope and dream is that we're all so amazing in our leadership and personal example of ownership that we never have to hold anyone accountable. But that only exists in a dream. Accountability is part of the role as a leader.

And it's a privilege to be entrusted with something important enough to be stewarded well, even to the point of a painful but necessary decision.

Ownership



Enjoy The Drive


It's been said, "the work no one sees produces the results everyone wants." I've found this to be true when it comes to ownership. You want your church to be filled with people who own the vision? Start by doing the work no one will see at first, but everyone in your church will notice later.

Understand that it's a privilege to be burdened with ownership.

Do the work of establishing a personal connection before demanding a personal cost.

Pour into the process of ownership before expecting the proof of ownership.

And hold people accountable with care, consistency, and commitment, so that your town, your region, and your state looks eternally different because you owned the call of God on your life.



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I've served over 20 years in vocational ministry, most of that time multiplying leaders in a variety of ministry settings. I built teams and systems in Texas and Colorado before moving to Charlotte to build new leaders and locations at Elevation Church. Now I love that I get to provide insights and encouragement to leaders through coaching and consulting. Our family lives in Orlando and attends Elevation Church with some of our best friends.



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