

THE MEANING AND SATISFACTION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR SENIOR SAGE LEADERS

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My civic involvements feed my spirit: Senior Sage Leader

As with emerging sages, those experiences that provide seniors with most meaning and satisfaction are organizational achievement and success, assisting others, helping to improve the community, teamwork, and personal and professional growth. In addition, some senior sages identify giving recognition to others as being highly meaningful.

Organizational Achievement and Success

Among the many achievements and successes of senior sages are communicating their organization's story to the community, achieving fund raising objectives, implementing and tracking performance of a strategic plan against goals, running successful special events, creating a new business and then finding an adequate location for its operation, achieving significant artistic quality and audience appreciation, filling downtown retail spaces, shifting the governing board from being an advisory agency to a corporate entity, weathering a host of problems, and producing a successful turn-around:

What is most satisfying to me these days is sitting in a meeting and listening to others talk about the organization, and reflecting on our accomplishments to date. And musing about all of the wonderful new things that are on the drawing board.

Helping to change the hospital's image from being a county hospital to becoming a really first-class health care facility and being recognized as such throughout the service area is very satisfying. We still have to work hard at this, but we have made a lot of headway. The

more I get involved in the hospital, the more I realize how fortunate we are to have the quality of physicians, staff, and health care that we do. One of the nice additions has been the new Specialty called hospitalist—whereby a physician practices at the hospital rather than having his or her own private practice.

The fact that we fill our retail spaces is a validation of what we do. By-and-far our biggest success is what we have been able to achieve with a lot of people chipping in – business owners, professional people, and businesses outside of the downtown.

Assisting Others

These experiences for senior sages range from seeing the success of young people, to being a co-founder of a homeless shelter, to mentoring:

I get enormous satisfaction from watching kids at the Young Composers Concert and hearing feedback from audiences and donors about how important our organization is to their young lives.

Seeing the shelter open with people coming in and getting help, getting fed, getting sheltered during the terrible winter seasons, and having a welcome center open during the summer where they can get water, bug repellent, tents, or simply be taken care of if they're sick—all of this has been greatly satisfying to me. Moving from labor-intensive, low-yield special events to authentic fund development for the organization has also been gratifying. I know how to do this now for any organization, and I almost feel I want to be a professional fundraiser.

The most meaningful experience has come from the mentoring I have done with a young girl. Knowing that she won't end up like her mother is gratifying. Mentoring the executive director has also been satisfying. The ED and I trust one another and work at helping and learning from each another.

Community Improvement

Many senior sages derive their most meaning and satisfaction from brick and mortar improvements in the community:

The most satisfying was in being successful in finding land and a building and purchasing it without having the community being totally up at arms about the location. Also, obtaining grants and working with homeless families and seeing life changes in them have been very meaningful. Some of these families were totally out on the street, and the impacts on their children were horrible. So much of homelessness is caused by drugs. It has been a total education for me.

Teamwork

Whether working in partnership with their favored organization's executive director or collaboratively with others, many senior sages derive great satisfaction from teamwork:

What is most satisfying for me is when something gets accomplished and people start becoming engaged, see the potential, and get excited. That's fun.

Giving Recognition to Others

And some senior sage leaders get personal satisfaction from the deserved recognition that others receive:

One of the most satisfying results is to bring recognition to the many law enforcement and fire services people who don't get acknowledged for what they do to keep us safe. We serve an important role in letting the public know how fortunate we are to have such dedicated people protecting us.

Finding the Satisfaction I: Success Often Comes in Small Packages

The senior sage leaders find gratification at many different levels when speaking about the satisfaction and meaning they derive from their work. It could be a small success or a big

success. Most importantly, they experience their work as “making a difference.” This seems to be critical and at the core of the senior sage leader experience in civic engagement.

Senior sage leaders often say they gain most satisfaction from seeing changes in the people with whom they work: a mother and father being re-united, helping someone who is homeless getting food and shelter. This sense of success is particularly poignant in the case of Habitat for Humanity. Volunteers see a single parent work hard for 600 hours in helping to build and move into her new home. The new home-owner is not just handed a gift; she works alongside volunteers in constructing it. There is a profound sense of accomplishment for both the new home-owner and the volunteer home-builders. It is these small successes that bring great satisfaction. Moreover, such successes helped to build a strong foundation for Habitat as an organization.

Finding the Satisfaction II: Seeing a Shared Dream Become a Reality

Small things amount to big results when it comes to the well-being of the community. Repeatedly senior sages note the benefit they receive from contributing in important ways to the quality of community life. In some instances, these community-wide contributions are acknowledged, but recognition and appreciation are not critical to senior sages – just nice, a sign that a vital link has been made between their organization and the community.

As with the emerging sages, senior sage leaders find it is not just a matter of being successful that is important; working with others to bring about the success is the heart of the matter. Senior sages report great heart-felt joy and gratification in working toward a shared goal with the men and women who bring differing perspectives and talents to a common cause. Furthermore, when the shared goal is achieved, it is witnessed in very tangible ways—in the accumulation of many small successes.