

Emerging Sage Leaders: Changes in Their Leadership Style

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The biggest change is that I don't expect perfection in myself as much as I once did. Emerging Sage Leader

Over the course of a life-time we pause many times to review and assess the behaviors and practices that shape who and what we have become. When we arrive at adulthood, we put aside the ways of our childhood. When we entered the workplace, we learned ground rules that differed from how we comported ourselves in college. And when we became parents, we truly got to understand what it means to nourish, love, and be depended on. Much of this we learn from observing others, and often we learn from our mistakes—deciding never to make the same ones again.

The phenomenon of on-going personal changes especially applies to leadership. Behaviors and practices once considered core to our leadership shift or fall away when we no longer find them effective or desirable. Sometimes the initiative for change surfaces as the result of a single transforming event, such as a peak life experience, while in others a long period of incubation and reflection are required before the need for personal, professional, or spiritual growth rises to consciousness. In any event, these transitions are key to understanding sage leadership. Emerging sages share a number of changes in the patterns and styles of their leadership behavior.

Changes in Pattern

These include being less ego-driven, no longer expecting perfection in self and others, being less confrontational, becoming a better listener, and truly valuing and caring about other people:

Becoming less ego-driven. Most emerging sages say they have come a long way from the arrogance of their youth. And they have become less driven and results-oriented, and less opinionated and self-righteous:

I cringe at how arrogant I was when younger. I think I have mellowed quite a bit.

When I was young I was very driven to achieve sensational results. I had led by example, and perfection was the goal. Now I view my leadership role more as mentor and coach. Rather than focusing on myself, I help others to acquire skills that enable them to move-up and better themselves.

I am a lot less opinionated and self-righteous than I used to be. Now I definitely listen to all sides of every story and feel more passionate about things that I really believe in. As you get older, I think you get stronger convictions about things.

No longer expecting perfection from self or others. This change reveals itself in no longer being uptight about getting things right all of the time, finding comfort in having finally established a good reputation, and reflecting on the role that willpower plays in the life of a leader:

Early in my career I was a purist. It was very important that I be absolutely correct in my analysis, and I was not always very strategic in how I operated. I often failed to take into account political and human factors or fully embrace the value of relationships—how to inspire others to follow my lead.

When I was younger I felt I had to prove myself and develop a good reputation. I now feel I have established that and believe I'm known as a person who has integrity and takes care of situations. And this gives me more confidence in knowing I will make mistakes because I am responsible for making many decisions.

My willpower has been a driving force in my life, and thus in my work. I used to rely on intense commitment to achieve whatever was necessary, given the situation. Over the years, and certainly with my divorce, I realized that I could not always control a situation

and bend it to my will. I came to understand that I could never achieve the level of perfection I had always been pursuing.

Being less confrontational. This has to do with no longer needing to have one's way, of stepping back from earnestness and assertiveness and being less intimidating:

One of the qualities of leadership requires convincing people to follow you someplace. When I was younger, I used to do that by eliminating choices for people so the right path was inevitable. As I've become older, I've let go of the more confrontational and political aspects of getting my way.

As a young leader my style could have been characterized as explicit, external, assertive, confrontational, verbose, and earnest. I am from an Italian immigrant family, where many of these characteristics are cultural norms. I came to realize that while I was a rather effective young leader in terms of my tangible accomplishments, my leadership style often placed me at cross-purposes with my broader goal of fostering a more peaceful society. I thought, "If I can't resolve conflicts and nurture peace in my own interactions, how can I possibly believe in the attainment of global peace?"

I can be passionate, intimidating, and can sometimes drown out other people. I've learned along the way through my outdoor education experience that there are many different leadership styles that can be effective. I've worked to embrace other styles that may not be my most obvious or natural style. If one's personality or leadership is not conducive to raising other people up, then perhaps it's time to get out of the way.

Becoming a better listener. Emerging sages are increasingly able to assess the role that effective communication plays in their leadership:

In looking back there were times I thought I knew something and then realized I was not always right, that my way was not always the best. So I think just sitting down and

listening is important. And allowing people to be part of a process enables them to embrace it rather than being told what to do.

I have always been a strongly opinionated person and rather upfront with them. I'd like to think I am gearing more towards listening and letting my opinions be known in gentler ways. It's an ongoing process, as communication is so important in all of our choices and relationships.

I'm starting to listen to people's advice more. When I give direction to people, I am getting better at helping them to succeed at their job while allowing them enough freedom to take ownership in the ultimate outcome.

Learning to value and care about other people. In their once popular book, *In Search of Excellence*, Tom Peters and Robert Waterman describe an interview situation where the interviewer asks the prospective hire what his strongest interest is. The interviewee answered, "People," to which the interviewer said, "Well that's good, because that's all we have here".

I did not realize that people need first to believe that I truly care about and value them before they will follow me, even if our cause and direction are undeniably important and correct.

I now see my responsibility as learning first what is important for the individual, and to see how I can dovetail those interests, strengths, and talents with the organization's needs.

Other changes in leadership behavior. To a lesser degree, emerging sages point to a wide range of other behavioral changes in their leadership, including becoming more patient, learning how to compromise, and understanding that anger doesn't serve a productive purpose:

I've learned that we have to work together, that there has to be a sound process, and that you need to get buy-in. I could easily be like a run-away train and make lots of plans, leaving the community behind. So I've needed to learn how to be more patient.

I continue not to compromise on questions of value, but I am learning how to work through compromises over the means of accomplishing things.

I have learned that getting angry with a difficult parent or staff member and letting that emotion take over does not serve any good purpose. So, I have tried to avoid that. I have learned to bite my tongue and take a calmer path to get where I want to be. When I was younger I was a little feistier, and that usually backfired on me. Anger really is the last thing you should use in your arsenal. It is very difficult to get back to a productive place after being angry, so I have learned to stay calm.

Emerging sages find they are better able to balance work and play, understand that change comes in small steps, see that sharing ideas is more important than who presents them, and find it is more important to ask the right questions than to have right answers:

I no longer stress-out out over the small stuff. I've learned that all businesses go up and down, and that you have to be comfortable riding that wave. If you believe in what you are doing and work hard enough, you will get the desired results. Sometimes things don't go as planned, but you learn how to bounce back. You also need to learn how to disconnect and find ways to relax outside of work.

I've learned that changes come in small steps rather than big leaps. I am more purposeful in my interactions with people now. I'm struggling with this, because it takes away from my natural spontaneity and ability to have fun in any situation, and that has always been one of my strengths.

As a young leader I thought it was my job to always have an answer. While I think there is value to a leader who can provide sage advice, experience has taught me that it is

more important to ask the right question than have the right answer. The value in posing the question is that it gives you an opportunity to gather responses, hear different points of view, build consensus, and come to the best decision.

Changes in Leadership Style

It might be expected that changes in the personal behaviors of emerging sages are reflected in changed leadership styles as well—and this is true. They identify six style change themes: being calmer and having a more authentic approach to leading, having more personal confidence in getting things accomplished, giving greater attention to the role of teamwork and collaboration, focusing more on getting results, and being optimistic in engaging others:

A calmer, more authentic approach to leading. The decision to be more authentic in dealings with others implies a commitment to personal transparency, and both introduce a calming effect on leadership style:

I think it's essential to insure that you are being authentic to your own nature when trying on leadership styles, and this has changed for me. I'm more confident in what works, and I tend to look at my role now as assessing what a situation calls for and consciously choosing the right solution. I also suspect that I'm calmer.

Greater personal confidence in getting things accomplished. It stands to reason that personal confidence in one's leadership style comes with experience in exercising leadership and being able to reflect on results:

I've transitioned from feeling insecure and unworthy to having increased self-confidence. I don't let my self-critic's voice impact me as much as I used to.

I'm more confident and voice my opinion more than I did when I was younger.

Greater attention to the role of teamwork and collaboration. A move to greater authenticity, calmness, and self-confidence opens the door for emerging sages to effectively engage in teamwork and collaboration:

My leadership style has become much more collaborative, and I attempt to use personal influence more than positional power. Also, pacing is important. Sometimes it is okay to go about things slower if you can achieve the same result with a better process.

Early on it was always “taking the bull by the horns.” I’d just do it and get it done. As I grew, I figured out how to delegate properly. My experience in corporate America really helped me in this way. My leadership style has changed to relying on a team of qualified people to achieve the same level or even better quality work than I would do myself. Having an awareness of this is probably the biggest change in my leadership style.

I try to seek and take in more input from people before making decisions. I also tend to be more of a consensus-builder and don’t try to go it alone as much as I used to.

More focus on getting results. With increased attention to the leadership role of promoting teamwork and collaboration comes the potential for achieving greater results than going it alone:

I guess I’ve become a little more confident in my abilities to get things done. Mostly, I’ve found that 90% of the time people will help with a project and are happy to be asked.

I’ve learned to be more direct and results-oriented in getting things done. Sometimes I would want to maintain a relationship with somebody instead of realizing there is a time and place for that, and there is a time to get things done.

Age, maturity, and experience have sculpted the person I am today. Early in our career I think we tend to be more egocentric. Then, as we experience the work world, we make thoughtful choices of who we want to be and what we want to be remembered for. If someone asked me 30 years ago if I thought I would be doing what I am now, and would

be viewed as a leader, I probably would have laughed out loud. The most important lesson I've learned is that talk is cheap and action changes lives.

Greater optimism in engaging others. It is little wonder that the emergence of optimism influences the leadership style of emerging sages:

Instead of leading directly, I hope I can facilitate a situation so other people feel empowered to lead on their own. This greatly increases my optimism.

I have more confidence in myself and my skills, and that has enabled me to be a better leader. I think that I really am an optimist about people and their abilities, and this has really grown.

I have changed from trying to be everything to realizing I could help others to lead and grow. This has made me very optimistic about my ability to work effectively with other people.

Other changes in leadership styles. Additional changes in leadership style are identified by emerging sages. They include greater risk-taking, becoming more focused on the big picture, developing patience and slowing the pace, and developing better listening skills:

I realize that things always work out in the end. So when you are making decisions or trying to lead people, it is ok to take risks. It is typically not the end of the world, and the sun will come up tomorrow after a decision is made.

I try now to be much more big picture-oriented rather than micro-focused. When I was younger, I thought that being a leader was being indispensable. Now, I view leadership as creating an organization so healthy that it can continue without me. It is a more mature role.

I have had a tendency to take on too much and be a little scattered as a result. One corrective has been my deliberate decision to become a better listener. This has really helped.

Emerging sages are also better able to deflect the spotlight and attention from self to others, no longer make quick decisions based on the first thing that comes to mind, and are able to step back and look at process:

I've become more modest. When I was very young, I looked for the spotlight and attention that came from having a leadership role. As I have grown older, I have gained the ability to deflect the spotlight and attention from myself onto others.

I have learned to reserve judgment and not be quick in making decisions based on the first thing that comes to my mind. I now take time to gather adequate information. I don't like people who come in and waste my time, but sometimes it is necessary to allow certain staff members to do that because it is valuable for them to express personal concerns or views. This helps build a relationship with that person, whether I agree with that person or not.

Emerging sages say they are now less likely to abdicate leadership due to fear of conflict. They realize that a leader's emotions set the tone for the entire office. At the heart of the matter is their increased ability to define and set boundaries:

I used to be introverted, goal-oriented, and focused on just getting the job done. Now, I am not just focused on the end result. I take time to step back and look at the process. I have learned to be more extroverted and have focused on developing my interpersonal skills, moving towards more of a participative style.

I used to be a lot more afraid of conflict. So much so that I abdicated some leadership responsibility because I was not willing to have conversations or deal with things that were unpleasant. It is now comfortable for me to have direct conversations with people

younger than me, but those who are older is still more challenging. One thing I've worked on changing is the dynamics between myself and my staff. I'm trying to define those relationships and set better boundaries and clearer expectations. This requires being more of a leader rather than a friend or colleague.

And emerging sages say they no longer attempt to please others all of the time—that they have achieved greater comfort with the idea of being a leader:

It has been very hard for me to see myself as an expert, especially after so many years in the role of student. I think it gets easier to trust myself over time. I have had enough experiences that add-up and say to me, "You have good instincts here." This has resulted in my becoming more willing to speak my mind and see the value of that. As a result, I'm increasingly able to let go more of the "need to please everyone all the time."

I feel that my leadership style is constantly evolving. Early in my career I felt more tentative in how I approached things, and now I have more confidence with the idea of being a leader. People had more confidence in me than I have had in myself. It is amazing the level of confidence that people have had in me! And, of course, I had to live up to it!

Stepping Outside Oneself

Emerging sage leaders ruminate about their growing awareness that a team of volunteers shouldn't be pushed too fast. By moving at a deliberate pace, team members can arrive at the desired place—and this can also result in more volunteers joining in along the way. Many emerging sages say that driving a decision too fast often results in its implementation proceeding at a snail's pace because corrective steps have to be taken. They conclude that it is worth taking time to think through a decision before making it, and to build strong interpersonal relationships in the process. For example, asking how a colleague's fishing trip went might be just as important over the long run as leaping into action.

As leaders in mid-career, emerging sages reflect on their leadership styles when they were in their 20s and 30s. They talk about how being opinionated and quick to action during these early years has led them to a place of greater humility; they listen carefully to other people and ensure that everyone has had an opportunity to speak their piece. Emerging sages also believed they were indispensable to the cause when they were younger: “I’m the one who has the vision, and I can achieve it myself.” “I must have all the answers, because everyone is looking to me for leadership.”

As they grow older emerging sages realize they have to be more oriented to “the big picture,” that the cause is larger than themselves, and that others are needed to shape and implement the organization’s vision. Rather than feeling required to have all of the answers, or feeling threatened because they don’t have them, emerging sage leaders are now inclined to gather additional information and rely more on those possessing needed expertise to solve problems. This has to do with their having become more inclusive over the years: “I could easily become a run-away train leaving everyone behind, but I’ve learned to be more patient, to get buy-in and bring people along.” “I can still be assertive, but can now show more compassion. I allow more space for diversity of perspective and for alternative opinions to come forward in identifying solutions to organizational issues.”

For many emerging sages, a key shift is the role that humility now plays in their leadership. They identify ways in which they are able to step outside themselves, and they talk about not taking everything as a personal victory or defeat: “Early in my career, I used to take things personally. If they rejected my idea or suggestion, I assumed I wasn’t smart enough or creative enough. I soon learned that the sharing of ideas is what is really important.” Earlier in their lives emerging leaders also found that not everything comes out the way they thought it would, and they blamed themselves for being ineffective or not being knowledgeable about the way in which the world operates. And they came to realize that not everything can be under their control: “I can influence some things, but not everything!”

Reasons for the Shift

What gets emerging leaders thinking in new ways about their leadership styles? For many emerging sages, these shifts are not just tied to growing older. They often resulted from life-changing experiences—for example, several women sages point to divorce as an event that catapulted them into a whole new way of thinking. Some emerging sages had international experiences during their early adulthood that helped to unfreeze them, while many had major challenges early in their careers. And some emerging sages didn't have clarifying and expanding life experiences to forge their identity as responsible adults and leaders until later in life.

Many emerging sages have had positive experiences and achievements that helped them to build self-confidence as a leader. Some aren't as demanding in their relations with other persons because their "inner critic" is no longer so strident; they have become more compassionate, patient, and forgiving of themselves and others. They also have come to realize that their colleagues sometimes can't follow through with commitments because things come up in their lives that pull them in other directions. And these emerging sages no longer feel they have to be the only voice at the table because they are no longer threatened by the strength of other voices. In short, they have now assumed a more confident and participatory leadership style.

We might speculate about the young men and women who have yet to make the transition to a more collaborative and patient form of leadership. Are these potential sage leaders frozen in time, still depending on leadership styles that are strident and self-referential? Are they still trying to achieve everything on their own? Are they resisting life experiences that can teach them about alternative styles and perspectives? If they are stuck, do they even know this? And do they know how to get unstuck? Does it take some galvanizing experience to set young men and women on a path to civic engagement that can shape their becoming collaborative and compassionate emerging sage leaders?