

## HOW SENIOR SAGE LEADERS LEAD

*The difference in the corporate world is that you can direct changes that need to be made if you have the authority. In the nonprofit world, you must show volunteers that you know what you are talking about and convince them of changes that need to be made. Otherwise it just won't happen.* Senior Sage Leader

### Themes

The 50 senior sage leaders say they most help their favored civic organizations in five key ways. Like their emerging sage colleagues, they provide leadership and specialized expertise. They also facilitate teamwork, enhance communication, and provide financial treasure.

Senior sages report they most help through their personal leadership. Often this involves bringing vision and providing sage advice to the nonprofit boards on which they serve, developing trust, reminding other board members what is needed to be effective, helping the board to work as one, and being able to plan effectively and focus on what to do next. It also has to do with the ability to attract a highly diverse and talented group of leaders onto the board, nurturing the executive director, listening to people and staying tuned to their motivations, and thanking volunteers. Two senior sages describe their leadership role this way:

*Early on I was approached to lead fund development and found that a different approach was needed. It was important to have all of our business sponsorships for the coming year committed by the end of November. We had never done this before. We obtained a pledge from businesses before the year started and received commitments up to \$600,000. Another effective thing we did was to establish a committee on stewardship, and a well-known consultant led a workshop that helped us with this concept. We learned that long-term relationship-building is the way to create and sustain a sound fund development program, and that acknowledging and recognizing major donors are key.*

*I most helped when I came onto the board about two years ago thinking I would serve for a while and eventually take on a leadership role. But when I arrived the organization was in a crisis that*

*split the board, and a number of people left. I was asked to stand for the board presidency in a contested election and was elected. Guiding the organization during that time was extremely critical, and I am proud that we got through the transition with no breakage even when there was some hostility, anger, conflict, and board members leaving. We do not have any residual bad feelings in the sense that some people may not particularly like each other, but no one is out to sabotage the organization or speak badly of it. As a result, the organization has ascended to a higher level in the last several years.*

The second most common way that senior sage leaders help their favored organizations is by offering specialized expertise. Sometimes this involves talent in strategic planning, being tolerant of conflict, using mediation skills, or teaching the business side of nonprofits:

*I have brought a pure business sense in my church to overlay the spiritual faith-based perspective of “Reach and spend money you don’t have and it will all work out!” Well, what if it doesn’t work out? I have been a grounding point and have also coordinated meetings with consultants. So I think I have brought business and coordinating skills to how we know who’s on first and who’s on second, what we are we doing about our financial commitments, and how we are going to finance the whole thing.*

Then there are senior sages who possess in-depth knowledge of a complete field of endeavor or an organization’s history:

*I have a deep history and understanding of what it takes to deal with the arts in Nevada County, and I think that’s my value at this point.*

*I believe I serve my organization best by being an idea person, a teacher, and a living memory of what has occurred since its founding. Also, some of the programming and projects we have done have either been my invention or co-invention. Increasingly, with new members coming onto the board with extraordinary experience, the need for me to play this role lessens—and that is a good thing.*

Ensuring effective communication is a third way senior sage leaders most help their favored civic organizations. Sometimes this involves providing leadership in telling the organization’s story to the outside world:

*Helping the hospital to effectively communicate its story has given me a great deal of meaning and satisfaction. The hospital is probably the largest non-government employer in Nevada*

*County. Yet hospital management barely knew who the mayors and council members of our two cities were. For this reason I encouraged hospital management, physicians, and nurses to become more involved in local community issues. This initially met with resistance because management didn't want to be put in a position of looking as if the hospital was taking sides on issues. In time, however, management came to realize that some issues are in their own self-interest—like the need for employee affordable housing. The hospital now has a vice-president for marketing, and this person gives regular feedback to hospital management from community stakeholders.*

At other times communication has to do with encouraging and facilitating the ideas of others to flow:

*The key thing I've done is to keep the organization an open forum for discussion. There's always pressure in a political climate to support politicians who see things in a certain way. I've fought tooth and nail to make certain we never did that. I felt it would degrade the organization, and we couldn't know the position of all of our supporters. So the best thing we can do is to bring in conflicting issues at a forum and have everyone work them out together.*

Nonprofit organizations are always in search of money to carry out their special missions. Most often this involves senior sages helping their organizations to raise funds or to contribute money themselves:

*I've helped the organization most by fundraising, and over the years have given a considerable sum myself. And then talking it up with others. Donation solicitation must be done peer-to-peer, because people of a certain status understand each other and communicate more freely. I've tried to lead by example.*

*When our Executive Director resigned just before our major summer musical festival, I added to my portfolio as Board President the position of Co-Executive Director. After the festival produced low ticket sales, we discovered we had major financial and organizational problems. In order to save the organization, we mobilized the Board to respond to this serious situation. Then we had to mobilize the community to respond from an emotional perspective if we were to preserve this wonderful community treasure. As Board President, I had to set a good example and draw upon my organizational skills.*

And some senior sages apply wise experience in helping their favored organizations to understand how best to approach others for funding over the long-term:

*We have emphasized relationship-building rather than simply asking people for money. If you ask someone for money, that's just one shot. But if you build a relationship and they believe in what*

*you are doing, then you can have that relationship forever—if you continue to cultivate and sustain it. So in emphasizing relationship-building, we ask people what they want and then give them feedback on how our organization is helping.*

## **Reflections**

Many senior sage leaders muse about the ways they are most helpful at the strategic level of their favored organizations. They are interested in, and believe they have the greatest skill when addressing, the “big picture.” They are able to sit back and link global perspectives to specific concerns of persons with whom they are working. For instance senior sage leaders often sit on nonprofit boards, and as board members they help to identify the rich resources and diverse perspectives that each board member brings to the table. They also help their board to formulate a unified strategic plan, and that usually draws on their entire life experience in working on behalf of a whole range of organizations.

We know from adult development literature that mature adults tend to resist narrow focus after they reach their 50s and 60s. They become systemic in their world view and seek to understand how everything connects, rather than emphasizing gaps in ideas, problems, and perspectives. One is reminded of the career of Peter Seeger, who helped coin the phrase “Think globally but act locally” — a guiding mantra for many community activists. Seeger’s perspective is appealing to many senior sage leaders as well because he suggests we must be interdisciplinary when tackling a local problem: We have to simultaneously consider economic, environmental, political, sociological, historical, and cultural issues when plotting a local initiative. And we must think beyond the confines of our own community.

In the case of Pete Seeger the question was, “How do we think globally as we attempt to clean-up the Hudson River?” Just as the Hudson River is in some respects an “island” in terms of its own unique culture, history and environmental dynamics, so too are Grass Valley and Nevada City an “island” community. Yet, the Hudson River and Twin Towns are inextricably linked to broader dynamics operating within their region, state, country, and world.