

HOW EMERGING SAGE LEADERS LEAD

I like to bring youthfulness to what I do and let older people know there are young people who respect them because they have such a wealth of knowledge. While their experience helps ground me, my enthusiasm helps them to renew their perspectives. Emerging Sage Leader

Themes

By far the most important contribution that most emerging sages make is in providing leadership. Sometimes this involves serving as founder of the organization. For other emerging sages it entails providing vision, great execution, leading through others, or simply being able to bring executive level experience to the table. Many emerging sages say they lead by being the public face and voice of their organization—and in building effective relationships with the community. Others lead by developing new and innovative programs, in making certain that the doors of city hall are kept open to all the people, in undertaking needed strategic planning, or in working to turn-around organizational culture. Says one emerging sage leader who recently was a city mayor:

One of the things we did was to meet with all the city employee groups and really listen to what they had to say. Without any attempt to manage outcomes, we just sat down and had discussions with them. I believe we held six meetings in all. It was good to listen to their concerns, and to hear how they have helped people in our community in ways we don't always get to learn about.

Another emerging sage leader expresses her leadership role this way:

My leadership in the areas of administration and strategic planning has helped us to begin evolving from an all-volunteer group of passionate individuals into an organization with paid staff, good bylaws, a better sense of our tangible goals, clearer agendas, and more work being done through committees. We need a strong functioning board, and I'm helping us move toward that.

Emerging sages also help their favored organization by offering specialized expertise. This involves such things as providing staff training and professional development, planning and implementing social activities, developing organizational outcome objectives, and helping to integrate services. One mentions her role in strengthening systems:

Although it's a small organization, there are certain systems that need to be in place no matter what the size. I think in terms of systems – both administrative and strategic—so I've been able to bring some systems and tools to the organization, including communications.

Promoting and developing collaboration is another way in which emerging sage leaders most help their favored organization. Sometimes this involves strengthening connections between nonprofit organizations and government services. At other times it requires representing their agency in community partnerships or in communicating with other organizations and community members:

I have most helped by carrying public health beyond the four walls of the health department with community-based collaborative efforts. I have also helped to develop a chronic disease prevention program with non-traditional partners, like nonprofits, environmental groups, and transportation and agriculture.

A final way that emerging sage leaders are helping their favored civic organizations is through finance and fund development expertise. Their assistance includes identifying financial problems and opportunities and ensuring transparency and sound financial practices. In the area of fund development this includes putting “best practice” policies and processes in place, writing grant proposals, soliciting money from donors, and taking calculated risks:

When I first started I spent a lot time trying to understand the organization's business practices, which were few at that point. Staff were just waiting for the phone to ring to rent the theater, but it wasn't happening. The biggest challenge was understanding that you can't make a profit off a 300 seat theater when you're only charging \$20 per ticket.

The big questions were, “Should we continue to exist? Are we truly needed?” Once we realized we had to take some risks and bring in bigger shows, we were able to raise the price of tickets and began selling out. We brought in big acts at \$50 a ticket and found that many people would buy them.

Reflections

One of the emerging leaders observes that most service clubs in Twin Towns are filled with very senior men and women. He suggests that he brings “youthful energy” to these clubs and new initiatives that can be attractive to the youth population of Grass Valley and Nevada City. However, this young sage leader also offers a balanced perspective when he expresses deep and abiding respect for the wisdom and history being brought to the community and service clubs by senior sage leaders. This balancing suggests a process of reciprocity: youthful energy in exchange for the lessons learned from older sage wisdom: “I just sit there and listen.” He notes rich insights to be gained from the careers of senior sage leaders, insights that seem relevant to the career of this emerging sage. It is not so much the conversations that take place during and after the service club meetings; it is just being in the presence of these wise older leaders and listening to them.

Thoughtful Listening

Emerging sages view themselves as contributing most to their organizations when they take in what is said by everyone present; they then reflect on the experience. While they bring youthful energy to their organizations, most emerging sages try to do so in a calm and deliberative way. Unlike their earlier adult years they no longer leap to a solution but, rather, encourage and appreciate diverse perspectives and alternative answers to complex community problems their organizations are facing.

Becoming Mentors

Emerging sage leaders are often at a point in their lives where they are being mentored by older Leaders—and they are also themselves becoming mentors to younger men and women in Twin Towns. They relish this new role, having in many instances moved away from an all-embracing,

ambitious push for personal achievement and individual recognition. They feel a bit mellower and are pleased with their shift from arrogance to humility, and from trying to do everything themselves to assisting others get work completed and ensuring they get credit for it. This is an important transition in the lives of emerging sage leaders, and in the ways they learn how best to serve their community.

We know from research that has been conducted on mentoring that many men and women who were not mentored during their early years find it hard to mentor others in their adult years (Endnote 89). Also, these people are more likely to “burn out” during their middle adult years than those who had experienced strong mentoring support during the first years of their careers. Apparently, a haunting sense of loss or failed support may remain dormant during the early years of an adult’s career—but comes back in full force later in life. It’s as if there is a time bomb ticking, waiting to be set off during one’s late 40s and early 50s.

These findings suggest that a move toward generativity among emerging sages—rather than a retreat into stagnation—may be traced to an early successful experience in being mentored. Now, as emerging sage leaders, they can “return the favor” by themselves becoming successfully engaged mentors. They become good listeners and strive to empower others in their organization, and they take on the mentor-oriented roles of community-connector and relationship-builder. This transition from mentee to mentor may be an important element in the creation of a sustainable community. Furthermore, this mentoring role may be particularly compatible with a new model of leadership that these emerging leaders seem to reflect.