

# THE MEANING AND SATISFACTION OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR EMERGING SAGE LEADERS

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*I'll take on the world to help someone else. That is part of who I am, and this keeps my life in perspective.* Emerging Sage Leader

The sources of meaning and satisfaction for emerging sages include achieving organizational success, aiding others, helping the community to improve, the intense feelings that can arise from collaboration and consensus-building, and personal and professional growth.

## **Organizational Achievement and Success**

The primary satisfaction that emerging sages get is participating in activities that lead to the achievement of organizational goals. Specific examples include opening a new high school on the assumption that there is more than one way to go about education, leading school culture away from intimidation and bullying to a place where everyone can be heard and respected, turning around an organization's reputation, knowing that a government agency is making a huge difference, finding a committed group of people who really want to change the school food program, mentoring an executive director, learning that systems integration can work, and a surprise discovery that teamwork can reduce school layoffs while sustaining governmental services in the face of budget cuts:

*What is most meaningful and satisfying is that our efforts have led to an ability to sustain most core Health & Human Services programs. When one branch is operating in the red due to the vagaries of funding, another branch helps out until solutions are found. There is a pendulum of funding in hard times. By pulling together and thinking creatively, we are able to sustain more than we ever could by retreating to our individual silos.*

## **Assisting Others**

Emerging sage leaders derive great satisfaction in learning they have made a difference in other people's lives. Examples include projects for youth and the elderly, helping kids who have a terrible home experience, developing work programs for families on public assistance, seeing what a difference mentoring makes in a child's life, and finding loving homes for abandoned dogs. And there are also the intimate encounters in helping others:

*I get to see everything I am working toward in the faces of children every day. I feel confident I can walk into any classroom at any time and will see something amazing taking place. It is incredibly rewarding. And occasionally they make me brownies.*

## **Community Improvement**

Seeing the results of community improvement is especially meaningful to many emerging sages. This ranges from great good that a Hospital Foundation does, to the incredible impact of 15,000 people coming from across the country to a Film Festival, to the satisfaction that is derived from creativity and passion in making the community a better place in which to live:

*I take a lot of satisfaction when business leaders in Nevada City say, "This was the best Victorian Christmas we've ever had." I fully understand that a great Victorian Christmas can make their entire season because it feeds families and puts money into the economy, which trickles down and keeps schools and other things open.*

And there are those very special community achievements that promise to endure forever:

*At least three dozen places in the Sierras will remain as they are today in perpetuity, because either South Yuba River Citizen's League or the Sierra Fund made this happen. I very much enjoy knowing that my kids are going to be able to go to Purden Crossing, or Spenceville Wildlife Preserve, or Donner Pass, or Bald Mountain, or the Truckee River, or any of these other projects for which I have provided leadership. This makes me very happy.*

## **Collaboration and Consensus-Building**

Creating trust, being a bridge-builder among people, helping to bring about consensus on difficult issues, seeing a complex plan come together, working interdependently in a positive way, and pulling people together for the common good—all have great meaning for emerging sage leaders.

*It gives me great satisfaction when people come to me for help. I can't always fix everything for them, but I am happy to try and be a bridge-builder between people with problems and people with solutions. It makes me happy to be an accessible resource to people and to feel involved in their lives.*

## **Personal and Professional Growth**

Many emerging sages reflect on the personal and professional growth they have achieved from being engaged in their favored civic organizations. To one emerging sage this means having gotten through a long learning curve in becoming an executive director; to another mentoring from the county's chief financial officer; and to a third having access to new learning opportunities:

*Within the probation department, I've had the opportunity to be in all of the units and become fluent in all the aspects of the organization. That's helped me become a leader in the department, and it has served me well. I tell younger department members that they should go after assignments in different areas of the organization because it gives them such valuable perspective to know that each unit has its own style and culture.*

## **Finding the Satisfaction I: Each Person's Own Source**

One emerging sage leader sums-up the satisfactions gained by many of his emerging leader colleagues: "It is witnessing the limitless possibilities that come when people pull together." Other emerging leaders say much the same thing in different terms. One indicates she likes working through conflict until the group reaches consensus. Another spoke about "giving shape" to an organization that previously didn't exist, while a third says she derives great satisfaction from bringing "credibility" to her organization. A fourth emerging sage reports tapping into the

unique gifts that each member of the group brings to a project. All of this seems to be about honoring diversity and bringing everyone together until there is a “finished vision” for the community.

### **Finding the Satisfaction II: Tangible Results**

Most emerging leaders are “extreme doers.” They are impatient with talk, and at the end of the day want to feel a sense of accomplishment. They need to be achieving something all the time, and their civic engagements enable them to meet this need while benefiting other persons. For many of the emerging sages, the greatest reward comes from immediately being able to witness the outcomes of their civic involvement; it’s about getting to an end result from a passionately held idea. It’s about identifying a community problem and organizing people to solve it. While many emerging sage leaders say they derive satisfaction from translating an organization’s vision into tangible results, one emerging sage identifies a different kind benefit. He talks about being a “translator” of the organization’s vision to the community and offers two examples: the educator who conveys her excitement about what happens in her classroom, the environmentalist who tells a compelling story about the still-wild Yuba River.

### **Finding the Satisfaction III: Generativity**

Erik Erikson, the noted psychological theorist and researcher, wrote about two different stages of generativity. The first is primarily associated with the raising of children, and of seeing one’s own children progress through life. The second stage of generativity comes with witnessing and providing support for people with whom one is working—especially if this involves collaborating to achieve a shared vision. The real satisfaction in this second stage comes from seeing something worthwhile being achieved: nurturing an organization, protecting a river, parenting children in a classroom. It is this second stage of generativity that is pervasive and vivid in the stories shared by emerging sage leaders. These men and women bring something to life and nurture it in collaboration with other persons. They watch it blossom and benefit others. They are truly co-parents of a community-based vision.

The alternative to the second stage of generativity is stagnation—a perspective that is filled with envy and resentment: “Why don’t I get much attention anymore?” “Why do these young people

seem to be having so much fun?” “Why are those young people behaving so badly?” “Whatever happened to my youth? I’ll never get it back.” It is through their civic engagements that Twin Towns’ emerging sages have found a way to be generative—a gift to their community and a gift for themselves and their own psychological well-being.