

**PITFALLS AND POTHOLES:
THE BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE EMERGING SAGE LEADERSHIP**

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When I look around the room I see all of those agencies, plus so many more, and wonder how we can get them together to work toward common goals in taking care of this community.

Emerging Sage Leader

Most emerging sage leaders experience numerous obstacles in working within their favored civic organizations. We found that six barriers were often present when our emerging sage leaders reflected during their interview on their experiences of civic engagement.

Financial Issues

It is a mark of the times that economic issues pervade the organizations in which emerging sage leaders are mostly involved. As budgets shrink, government agencies and schools must make excruciating decisions about priorities. For those involved in nonprofit organizations, the frustration involves the need to reduce valuable services to clients. Other emerging sages experience a long-term mentality of poverty within their favored organizations that keeps board members from thinking and acting in big and inventive ways. Or they find themselves involved in new nonprofit start-ups, where there are many great ideas about how to grow the organization but virtually no operating funds to implement them. Some emerging sages are part of organizations that are entirely funded by grants, and it is difficult for them to see making ends meet beyond the current grant period. And there is the ever-present challenge of helping people to overcome fears about raising money:

The biggest roadblock has been to change the way people think about philanthropy. It is hard to get the board and the staff over their fears. One of the typical ones that people have is they feel they can't ask people for money.

Internal and External Communications

The most common communications issue for emerging sages is that their favored organizations either don't have a marketing plan, or don't know how to tell their stories effectively, or simply don't have a clue about its importance. Personnel in government social service agencies sometimes get so focused on the burdens of their work that they forget how to communicate the benefits and joys of what they do; and of course working within slow-paced government bureaucracy is always a challenge in getting people to perform as a team in achieving goals. Moreover, navigating politics is a hazardous business, as is dealing with a "silos mentality":

For so many years it was the silo mentality, agencies being very protective of their money and resources and saying, "That's not our kid." I remember a couple of cases throughout my career where I could not find a solution, and doors were closed. I did some pretty radical things to get action from department heads and professionals who had a "keep out" policy. We were just bouncing kids and families in crisis around with no results. It is the greatest reward to see what we have in place now.

Internal Stress and Conflict

Emerging sage leaders find the sources of internal stress and conflict especially onerous. As mentioned earlier, some experience incredible frustrations of working in a large government bureaucracy. Others attribute internal stress and conflict to ineffective leadership, infighting, people vying for power and lashing out to sabotage good work, or the inability of their organization to work collaboratively. Within the nonprofits they serve, a number of emerging sages place the blame on weak or timid boards, people's fear of change, inability to negotiate, the lack of infrastructure and staffing, overdependence on volunteers, and simply internal culture. As one emerging sage observes:

The greatest roadblocks have involved finding the balance among directing, delegating, and

supporting. Currently my staff members are all women, with most of us in a similar life stage. Since it is such an intimate office, it can be a bit challenging when it comes to personnel issues. I sometimes find myself responding as a mother rather than as a boss or colleague.

Personal Issues

Then there are the personal issues that emerging sage leaders bring to their organizations. Some emerging sages are insecure because of their relative youth; they feel they get little respect or are overwhelmed by the steep learning curve they are experiencing. Other sages say they are too strident and admit they sometimes inhibit change by staying married to ideas that don't have meaning to other people. And one reflects on his impatience:

I sometimes get frustrated with the slow pace of government and have to pull back awhile until I am patient enough to dive back in again. There have been quite a few moments on city council that I didn't enjoy my job at all. This would typically only last a short time, but it has often been necessary for me to step aside for a while and recharge before getting immersed again.

And one emerging sage points to another problem:

The day-to-day personnel issues are the hardest to deal with. I would rather do almost anything else! It is personally difficult for me to slow down and deal with people who are not on board with the work we do, who are not passionate and excited about our mission.

Differences between Nonprofit and For-Profit Organizations

A number of emerging sages are from the business world. They find that those who have spent their entire careers in nonprofit work simply don't understand the differences between corporate and nonprofit business models. Consequently, they have their own adjustment problems:

Going from being an entrepreneur and running a C Corporation to running a non-profit has been a bit of a learning curve for me. And being comfortable in allowing other people

to make decisions has also been challenging. Another roadblock is having a single major source of income, with donations making up the balance of our financial needs. This has been difficult to get used to.

Time Commitment

Perhaps foremost among challenges that emerging sage leaders have in their civic involvements is their full-time careers. Time away from the office is difficult to find and often to commit to. They say it is hard to prioritize time because *everything* is so important:

Because we have so many civically-engaged individuals with real passionate connections to our organization, it is a real challenge to get them to commit the kind of time that is necessary to implement change while keeping good relationships with all of the parties who are involved.

Confronting the Obstacles: Becoming Team Leaders

Several emerging sage leaders talk about the contribution they make in helping members of their organization to come together around a shared vision—and hold it while dealing with minutia. They also observe how important it is to recognize and support the multiple leadership roles played by those who can articulate the vision, and those who know how to build the infrastructure and action steps needed to implement it. These thoughtful emerging sages understand they are effective in communicating organizational vision, and that they must work closely with leaders who are strong in other areas. In short, emerging sages acknowledge they can't do everything themselves and shouldn't even try. So, the need to delegate and trust the skills and commitment of other people in the organization is seen as critical.

A growing appreciation for teamwork is pervasive among the emerging sage leaders. In many ways, this shift from an individualistic to a collaborative perspective is a common theme not only in Twin Towns but also within corporations, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations throughout the United States. The emerging sages know that they have to exemplify the fundamental values of their organizations by “walking their talk.” And when they model

behaviors for which their organization stands, they are able to build greater credibility for it in the community.