

PITFALLS AND POTHoles: THE BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE SENIOR SAGE LEADERSHIP

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The most surprising thing to me is there are many people in this community with financial means who I knew were interested in our theatre. The people who could have written a check to save the company just sat back. Senior Sage Leader

In working with their favored civic organizations, senior sages experience most of the same obstacles as emerging sage leaders: financial challenges, communications, internal stress and conflict, personal issues, and problems that arise over differences between nonprofit and for-profit organizations. Unlike emerging sage leaders, seniors also identify the absence of effective leadership as a major challenge.

Financial Challenges

The organizations in which emerging and senior sage leaders are affiliated face most of the same financial issues, especially the economic downturn and severe budget cuts. But seniors also point to other financial issues, like needing to hire an executive director in order to ease the load on volunteers:

You reach a certain point where an all-volunteer board can't move the organization to the next level without an infusion of human and material resources to make it sustainable. As a result of sound strategic planning that took place two years ago, we are now at a point where we can't make the next jump in our development without an executive director and other resources. As I think back over eight years, I recall there was a lot of resistance to the

idea of us even having a formal board of directors, much less an executive director. Happily, those persons who lacked vision back then are no longer involved.

Or there is the frustration of not being able to pay an artistic director what he deserves:

The most challenging roadblock has been the transition within the board. Continuing challenges include the need for funding to pay our staff competitively and to continue growing the organization. However, I still have some board members who are very conservative about how we should budget next year for staff artistic director salaries.

For some senior sages there is the continuing challenge of sustaining their organization's cash flow:

Our first and most obvious challenge was the building, and the challenge of securing enough cash flow to ensure we would survive until we took control of it. We were month-to-month, and to book acts we had to be highly opportunistic. We hit a couple of rough spots, and turning the organization over to people who didn't exhibit leadership at critical points set us back two and a-half years.

And there is the sad story that a senior sage leader shares about the closing of a major community theatre company due to crushing long-term debt:

Our major roadblock was \$250K in long-term accumulated debt, and that became insurmountable when the economy went from "go-go" to deep recession. At the same time, many donations dried up and ticket sales fell off because many people stopped going to the theatre. We constantly had to play a balancing act of paying our bills with the revenue we had. And we had a plan for survival, but it just didn't happen. We made a public appeal, but the deep pockets sat on the sidelines while hundreds of people who really cared about the theatre but didn't have a lot of means gave their \$20, \$50 or \$100.

External Communications

Like their emerging sage counterparts, senior sages identify internal and external communications issues as troubling.

The biggest roadblock I experienced in serving on the board was management's initial inability to understand the important role that marketing plays in any organization. This education process has been on-going. A related roadblock has been the challenge of convincing management to allocate funds to create and implement a marketing plan.

One challenge has to do with changing the public perception of what our clinic was 20 years ago to what in reality it is today. I believe we have moved a long way toward raising the awareness in the community of the clinic's value. But the view still persists in some circles that we are a little clinic out in the boondocks.

Internal Stress and Conflict

The sources of internal conflict and stress are many, including problems with volunteer governance, distrust, board and staff issues, and lack of teamwork:

Volunteer governance has inherent roadblocks. It is very difficult to "beam-in" a cadre of volunteers once a month to deliberate complex issues when these people have a wide range of knowledge, commitment, and belief.

The roadblocks primarily have been people who have distrust so high on their radar that they can't get past or evaluate an idea on its merits. It can also involve paranoia and fear. Or it may be their personal inability to develop relationships that creates obstacles.

There were difficult relationships between the staff and the board. Once you get focused on the idea of the team, you have got to make it work. We used the theme of a three-legged stool (tasks, processes, attitudes) at a retreat, which I saw as a very valuable tool. We had new board members and had to find a way to get them to know other members. One of the things I remember so clearly is that we broke into three groups and recounted stories of what had led

us into leadership roles. Some of the things we heard were amazing, and it opened our eyes and hearts.

Personal Issues

Senior sage leaders are candid in saying that some of the roadblocks in their favored organizations are their own fault:

Most of the roadblocks I have experienced in the organization have to do with myself. Historically, success has been very important to me and failure to be avoided at all costs. Being up front and center is not my favorite thing to do, although I have done a lot of it. I don't like personal attention. I simply want to put it out there and get everyone involved in getting things done.

The challenge for me has been not to overdo and be on all the committees, as well as learning how to step back and not be so involved.

We had a board member who was abusing the office staff. I met with him and asked that he stop. He thought about it and decided to resign from the board, although he is still supporting the organization. That was a success. He was a major contributor, and I was very much afraid he would stop. But he hasn't.

Differences between Nonprofit and For-Profit Organizations

Like emerging sages, some senior sage leaders experience challenges in understanding nonprofit culture:

I had never really been around non-profits before so I have been learning to deal with that non-profit mindset, and the fact that everyone is a volunteer. You have to be highly persuasive to get things accomplished.

I think the most challenging thing with all organizations involving volunteers is the same as in business: personalities! In a business you have some control, but with volunteers you have much less of it.

Absence of Effective Leadership

Many senior sage leaders find that ineffective leadership is the greatest roadblock they encounter in their favored organizations. Sometimes this has to do with leadership styles:

Well, the major roadblock for me has been the leadership styles of the executive director and the board president. The president has been permissive and passive. We talk and decide about things, and he simply throws it to the winds and expects it to be done. He won't follow-up and call on people for progress reports, so things fall through the cracks and three months later things still haven't been done. There is no accountability, because if you're going to give someone a job, you better check-up on it. With the executive director, the roadblock is that she thinks she is in charge of everything, has to do everything, and reports to no one except herself.

Frequent turn-over of leadership is also troubling:

The biggest roadblock has been leadership change. One of our founders who had served as executive director for 14 years decided to leave. This was traumatic for the organization. His replacement did not work out well, and we experienced the same with the next ED. This was a real struggle during the transition because we did not have an ED for a six-month period. So as board president I conducted staff meetings myself.

And there is always the challenge of getting enough volunteers and not burning-out existing ones:

Getting enough volunteers to take on leadership roles in organizations has been a major roadblock. The same people volunteer or get goaded into taking on multiple positions

because others don't have the skills. Or feel they won't be successful in the roles, or simply don't want to commit that much time.

Confronting the Obstacles I: Going Above and Beyond

Some senior sage leaders have worked within organizations that have a very narrow focus. They helped these organizations to broaden their scope and provided counsel about the value of collaborating with other community organizations. They also assisted their organization in becoming more fully aware of community needs and in envisioning ways in which their organization could strategically respond. For example, a senior sage leader pointed-out that the safety of the community's minority members was not being considered when transportation plans were being prepared to increase minority access to work settings and community services: "If it's not safe to walk here, then it is not safe to shop here. And if our citizens don't feel safe shopping here, how can we expect our businesses to thrive?"

Perhaps as part of their generativity, many senior sages report that their "job" in working as a volunteer is to build on the accomplishments of their predecessors. Rather than starting something new, which might bring personal recognition and ego-gratification, these dedicated seniors value continuity and honoring past contributions. Their passion is contagious, as is their appreciation for work already done. This enables them to generate new energy as well as re-kindled old passions. They re-interpret the existing vision of their organization so community members can see the often unacknowledged value inherent in work already done, and will continue to be done by the organization.

Confronting the Obstacles II: Starting and Sustaining an Organization

In many cases senior sage leaders founded organizations—often in collaboration with other sages. However, these leaders weren't just founders. They stuck around long enough to ensure that the organization would be sustained, that it had sufficient "wind under its wings." In many instances, the senior sages traversed several different stages of organizational development.

They were first founders, then trained or coached others to take over as leaders, then moved into a support role, then became liaisons to the community on behalf of the organization. As leaders

with a broad base of experience in many organizational settings, senior sages are able to find the right words at the right time to bring attention and credibility to the role played by their organization in the community.

Confronting the Obstacles III: Crisis-Leadership

By contrast, some senior sages feel that their major contribution has been not so much in building on the work of their predecessors and providing continuity. Instead, they help the organization to change directions by leading it out of difficult situations: financial crisis, aimless direction, failure of past leaders to confront hard realities. These senior sages move into a troubled organization because it is virtually on the brink of collapse; they bring their broad-based perspectives and skills to crises and breathe life into the organization by helping to renew and transform it.

Perhaps most important, the senior sage leaders help by bringing together organizational members around specific needs. Their capacity to focus is critical: “What are the three things we need to do over the next six months?” They also apply their organizational skills when helping to address a crisis: “How do we most effectively deploy the scarce resources we have to solve this specific problem?” And they help to create effective teams that can provide sustained attention to solutions that have been identified. Because many of the senior sages have substantial contacts within the community, these teams are often able to attract additional human resources that can be brought to bear in addressing issues. Thus, some senior sage leaders serve as founders while others serve as saviors of existing organizations—each working on behalf of the community’s welfare.

It is particularly timely that many senior sage leaders talk about the need to manage organizational crisis, for the citizens of Grass Valley and Nevada City live in a state that is itself in perpetual crisis. The difficulties facing California have come to mean that nonprofit organizations must attempt to fill voids left by the collapse of many municipal services. Clearly, there will not be sufficient governmental resources to respond to all, or even major, societal needs. This means that government leaders increasingly may be in the business of networking rather than directly providing all public social services. And for that to happen, these leaders

must increasingly recognize the value that is inherent in the energy, resources, agility, and leadership which senior sage leaders can provide in these nonprofit organizations.