

What is Motivating for Senior Sage Leaders

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I've always felt the need to be involved and I've always enjoyed it, working with right-thinking people who appreciate our community. Senior Sage Leader

While emerging sage leaders identify with all five motivations, most senior sages are chiefly motivated by altruism and self-interest—and a few by power. The altruism motivation focuses on three activities: community improvement, wanting to giving back, and helping others.

Community Improvement

The motivation of wanting to improve the quality of community life is one of the greatest motivators for senior sage leaders. This has to do with grabbing any important situation by the neck and providing specific leadership that is needed; they want to leave a legacy for their children and grandchildren, influence the various sectors of the community to work collaboratively, and fulfill long-held dreams during retirement years:

There are things as a county or city leader that if you don't take charge, initiate and get some enthusiasm going, nothing will get done. I guess this has to do with leading by example.

The best thing I ever did, besides marrying my wife, was having the opportunity to come here to live, raise a family, and somehow scratch out a living when we didn't have two nickels to rub together. I always felt this country was founded on the principal of people becoming involved in their community. Back then we didn't have professional politicians here. Instead, business and other leaders would come together to run this community, then leave and someone else would come and do the job. We've screwed that up so it doesn't happen much anymore.

In a community you need the private, public, and nonprofits working together. Working to get all three sectors to do this inspires me, and I believe those of us who have the skills need to jump in and work together.

I like meeting new people and learning from them. And I enjoy engaging them in something productive. I also have a strong desire to help others and get things accomplished in our community. When I retired young at 55, my goal was to provide time, talent, and treasure for our community.

Giving Back and Helping Others

This dimension of altruism plays out in a variety of ways for senior sage leaders:

Shortly after we returned to Grass Valley we were at a dinner party and an old friend said, “Well, now it’s time for you to give back to the community.” I thought about this because I had not been back here very long, but he was absolutely right. This was a wonderful place to come of age, and I valued this so many times—whether it was my teachers, the people I worked for, or others who gave me a boost. These experiences really shaped me.

My husband and I agreed it was time for us to give back because we have been very fortunate. We have enough to live on and have traveled many places around the globe. We started doing things like working on Habitat for Humanity sites and finding organizations that we believe in. I want to give back to children who are in pain in their childhood the way I was. Maybe that’s why I am into helping to develop people, so they can become fulfilled and feel joy.

I usually see a need that’s not being filled, and it often has to do with people and especially children. Then I dream about it. It’s like Kennedy’s thing, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” So it has been natural for me to ask why there wasn’t a homeless shelter here and how one could come into being.

Self-Interest

Perhaps it is better expressed by senior sages, as the search for personal fulfillment rather than self-interest. Senior sages discuss this motivation in various ways:

The need is simply there. If it wasn't, we would have to invent it to meet our need for personal fulfillment. It has to do with propelling the quality of our community life, and I am privileged to want to give the balance of my life to this goal.

I'm a social person and I like to be involved. There's no way that in retirement I'd sit around and knit or read all the time. And I enjoy being appreciated. It's fun to be a big frog in a little puddle. People actually thank me for what we're doing in offering superb music, and I feel we're succeeding. It's very inspirational and keeps me going!

And for other senior sages, it's something more innate:

It's simple. I was raised that way. My father, a blue collar worker with two years of high school, used to say, "When you make a living in your community, you give back in whatever way you can." So this has been a family tradition that has been passed on. Also, having been in education, it is natural to think of service to my community in this way.

Certain things have to be done, and it's just something that I do. I don't really think about it, and I don't need to be told. If I see that something is needed, I do it.

It's just who I am, it's how I was raised. It's also a way to have a sense of belonging, of knowing it's my community. And it's a way to have a personal role. I'm a "2" in the Enneagram, a helper.

What is Motivating I: The Joy of Involvement

It is a joy for almost every senior sage leader to be involved in civic projects, and they especially value their association with colleagues. In most instances, senior sages first got to know others through their involvement in one or more community projects; this became their “admissions ticket” to Twin Towns. Rather than hunkering down in an isolated retirement community, they chose civic engagement and found they were welcomed by like-minded people. In short, this new community within a community became their social hub and network.

What is Motivating II: Giving Back

Most senior sage leaders suggest they are motivated by a desire to give back to their community because the community has already given something of value to them. In many cases, they were welcomed to Twin Towns through the volunteer efforts of their neighbors. Now they want to be the neighbors who welcome other newcomers. Not a few senior sages have learned about volunteer work from participating in workshops that are sponsored by the Center for Nonprofit Leadership (CNL). Several seniors now want to help plan these workshops and even lead some themselves.

There is a second sense of giving back. The senior sages often recognize they have acquired certain talents and experiences during their many years in corporations, governmental agencies, and nonprofit organizations. They believe what they have learned from these experiences should be shared with younger men and women—that not to do so would be a waste. However, this sense of payback is not enough. It doesn’t really capture the essence of the motivational basis for civic engagement among senior sage leaders. If service to the community is seen only as payback, or as nothing more than obligation, then civic engagement is likely to be a half-hearted, short-lived affair.

What is Motivating III: Double-Barreled Success and Personal Fulfillment

The sense of obligation only goes so far, for there is something much more to senior sage leadership when it comes to motivation. Volunteer community service has to “feed the spirit.” Even if they don’t initially know what it means to have their spirits fed, senior sages soon discover they are being nurtured by their civic service. And this suggests a different kind of

generativity. Senior sages are usually men and women who have worked for a living throughout their adult lives, so the question might be posed this way: “Why do they do this if they’re not being paid?” The answer is not that they “owe” someone this service, but that they come alive through civic engagement and find new meaning and purpose in their lives. These senior sage leaders *are* getting “paid” but with payment to their spirit rather than their bank account. And there is payment to their physical well-being as well, for research shows that the senior citizen lives longer when spirit, mind, and heart are all being fed.

So for most senior sage leaders, giving back is much more than a sense of duty. It is contributing to social good because the personal rewards are so great. Senior sages find rich fulfillment in the work they do and in the results they are able to achieve—especially in collaboration with other members of the Grass Valley and Nevada City community. Many senior sages get involved in the arts and witness the great pleasure others take in attending a play or musical event. Many also see differences that they are making in the lives of women who are seeking shelter, or in helping children who are in need. These are tangible rewards that senior sages can readily observe and feel firsthand. In many cases, the senior sages had a career in business and were motivated by that success. They now find it is fulfilling to succeed at something that benefits other people in their community. This becomes a “double-barreled” success.

Senior sages are particularly motivated when double-barreled success is associated with a compelling sense of mission. If their favored nonprofit organization has a clear mission and vision of what is needed and being sought, then success for senior sages is much sweeter and their energetic commitment to do more is that much greater. When the mission, for instance, concerns the welfare of children, passion is easily ignited and senior sages readily find personal fulfillment. There is nothing quite like saving the life of a child or helping a child toward a promising future. It is in seniors’ work with children that we often find the most significant kind of generativity—a merging of two or even three levels of generativity.

What is Motivating IV: Multiple Levels of Generativity and Longevity

Our study of sagacious leadership has led to an unanticipated and very important finding: There may well be a third level of generativity. Level One Generativity primarily involves the raising

of children and is usually associated with motives to provide for their care during our early adulthood. Level Two Generativity, which is the principal focus of work done by Erikson, is concerned with care motivations that are manifest during mid-life: establishing a new enterprise, leading an organization, teaching others, mentoring, witnessing the growth of a colleague. Level Three Generativity seems to be about something much bigger, something more than just preparing for our deaths as older adults. It's about becoming inspired to engage in advancing the civic welfare of Grass Valley and Nevada City.

Erikson proposed that the primary developmental task during the final years of our lives is to seek ego integrity and not fall victim to existential despair. Put simply, Erikson thought that by the time we reach 60 years of age we begin preparing for our own death. Now, increased life-expectancy is giving the average senior 15, 20, or even 30 more years to choose between vibrant engagement or stagnation and decline. Yes, there are people who withdraw and lead a life of despair; Erikson's challenge is an accurate description of the unfortunate men and women who choose to retreat behind gates and closed doors. For whatever reason, these people seek to disengage or are forced to disengage. Maybe it is burn-out, lack of energy, or illness. Perhaps it is insufficient finances or the absence of a caring family. And for some seniors who have made this choice, the end of generativity may have come earlier in life.

Senior sage leaders are too busy to fall into despair or worry about pending death. They are fully engaged in leading social reform and other forms of community service. They have made the choice—usually conscious—that “Withdrawal is not for me!” They aren't going to stop now, at this point in their lives. And in so doing, they have helped to identify the third level of generativity for which the citizens of Twin Towns and other communities should be grateful.

And there is that additional something for which the senior sage leaders are themselves grateful. We know from the literature that we stay vibrant in old age if we remain socially, intellectually, and physically active. And when we do, we live longer. At some level we all know – and the senior sage leaders particularly know—”If we don't use it, we're going to lose it.” So it is reasonable to conclude that civic engagement and the third level of generativity can be based on

a wonderfully selfish motive—a recognition that we need to be civically engaged if we want to stay vital and remain alive!

What is Motivating V: Quiet Generativity

Most senior sage leaders also want to leave a legacy, a footprint in the sand. But they don't care if anyone knows this is their footprint. They are doing civic community work to feed their own spirit and to witness an impact that goes well beyond the gratification of their egos. There certainly is nothing wrong with getting a little credit for the work being done, but this is not their primary motivation. Often no one else in the community knows about the phenomenal amount of work being done by any given senior sage, but it is not important to them that they know. One very senior woman who has played a major leadership role over many decades speaks of “giving quietly” and “leading quietly.” As she expresses it, “The good Lord knows, and that's enough.” This is true charity.