

# **Sacrifice: Does It Exist for Emerging Sage Leaders?**

**By Gary Quehl and William Bergquist**

*I definitely sacrificed something over the last year-and-a-half, which is no one's responsibility but my own.* Emerging Sage Leader

The subject of civic engagement begs the question of whether the involvements of sage leaders come at high cost. And whether such sacrifices are off-set by the personal benefits they receive. It is in this domain that we correctly anticipated the greatest differences between emerging and senior sage leaders. Of the 50 senior sage leaders who were interviewed, 49 said there was virtually no sacrifice involved, that their civic work is enriching their lives. While the older leaders in most cases are now retired, or at least have fewer family constraints, the younger emerging leaders are typically in the midst of career demands and family obligations. So how do they not see civic engagement as yet another pull on their time, talent, and energy? How do they not see this voluntary work as a sacrifice?

The emerging sage leaders are evenly divided among those who believe that civic engagement definitely involves personal sacrifice, those who believe it does not, and some who hold mixed views. Emerging sages who believe their civic engagement has been at great personal sacrifice offer three principal reasons: time away from family, impact on health, and harm to domestic bliss:

*I feel I sacrifice the time I have with my two young children. A day does not go by when I don't feel guilty about the hours I spend at work and on civic activities. I involve my kids whenever there is an opportunity, and they are often the youngest participants at a community event. I also make great effort to be present when I am at home and to work after they go to bed. I am fortunate to have the support of a wonderful husband who is a*



*stay-at-home dad. I am convinced I would not be able to do the job that I do without his support.*

*I over-extended myself when I was having very serious health issues. I was really sick from October 2008 until April 2010 because of overlapping illnesses. If I were to do it over again, I would have prioritized my health more.*

*I want to say no. But honestly, because I am so passionate about my work, it is really easy to allow myself to become wholly consumed by it. This hasn't been good for my personal life. Recently, I separated from my partner of eighteen years, and my consuming passion for my work definitely was one of the factors. I did not have a healthy work-life balance, and that clearly impacted my personal relationship.*

About an equal number of emerging sage leaders say their civic involvements do not require personal sacrifice, and they offer three reasons: personal fulfillment, family involvement, obligation:

*I don't feel there is sacrifice because what I choose to put my energy into are things that I'm really passionate about. I don't get involved out of a sense of "should" because I realize that those things don't give me energy.*

*I'm fortunate to have a wife who is actively involved. We enjoy doing these things together.*

*This is a life I have chosen and feel I have been called to. So I don't see my civic involvement as something outside of my life. It permeates everything I think about and do. There is no disconnect between it and my teaching, coaching, family, and the property we live on. It is all connected and is the best it can be.*

And there are those emerging sage leaders who feel mixed about the sacrifices they make in their civic involvements:



*I sacrifice my time, but I would not do anything differently. Sometimes my involvement in the community leads to recurrent 12-hour days. It can be exhausting, but it is worth it!*

*I feel I am sacrificing direct time with my children but believe that the trade-off of setting an important example for them with my community involvement more than compensates for this sacrifice.*

*Yes there is a sacrifice, but most people today need to work. In some families the mother may have a more active role taking care of the children. In ours, it is the dad who is more involved in day-to-day activities. We talk about this as a family, and my husband and girls both know they are to tell me if they need more of my time. They are proud of the work I do and volunteer or participate when they can.*

### **The Nature of Sacrifice I: When Does It Feel Like a Sacrifice**

Several clear factors have led some emerging sage leaders to view their civic engagements as more of a sacrifice than is the case with others. Among those having children, there is a strong sense that civic engagement means sacrificing home time, while those who either have no children or no longer have children living at home, the answer is very similar to senior sage leaders: sacrifice is minimal. One emerging leader even says that she and her husband were not going to have a second child in order to sustain their civic engagement—and because of her low income as a public employee. Clearly, it is hard to nurture a child while also trying to nurture a community.

A second differentiator is age. While not many of the emerging sages are in their late 20s or early 30s, those who are face unique challenges. Some of the younger emerging sage leaders talk about feeling alienated from their peer group—that while in addition to their paid work they are working in several nonprofit organizations their friends are “enjoying life.” These emerging sages don’t have time to be self-indulgent. They find it difficult to meet others of their own age with the same kind of passionate commitment to some specific community issue. And they don’t easily find friends, so feelings of isolation and being under-appreciated abound. As the



developmental theorist Bernice Neugarten has noted, it is very difficult for people who are out-of-sync with their peer group. They have “grown-up” too fast and are assuming the burdens of mature adulthood without going through what Erik Erikson calls the “moratorium”—a stage for safe exploration of alternative identifies, values, and life-styles.

There also is a third differentiator. For some of the emerging sages, civic engagement is closely tied to their workplace. For others, civic engagement is essentially unrelated to the work they do for pay. It’s a bit easier for the first group, although virtually all of the emerging sages report the need to set boundaries and avoid taking on too much—regardless of the alignment between their paid and unpaid work.

### **The Nature of Sacrifice II: Managing Boundaries**

It should be noted that even though sacrifice is clearly present, emerging sages speculate about the rejuvenation that comes through their civic engagements. Even when volunteer work is closely related to work being done for pay, there is something about it that brings new energy to the paid work and provides a level of gratification that a formal “job” rarely does. Several of the emerging sages observe this symbiosis: civic engagement may serve as an “antennae” for what is really happening in the community. And this may benefit the emerging leader’s paid work as well.

This doesn’t mean the conflict over seeking balance among family, career, and civic engagement is absent or reduced. A considerable amount of tension and struggle is still present and expressed by many of the emerging sage leaders. Even when a good balance is struck for a brief period, something usually happens and everything goes off-kilter again. As one emerging leader observes, “It is very easy to get all-consumed in volunteer work, given my passion for it and the outcomes it yields.” And this is a person who doesn’t have children and doesn’t have to balance volunteer work with family time. Another emerging leader, an elected official, says the sacrifice to his private life is an unresolved trade-off against the gratification he receives from his public service.



The loss of private life is particularly apparent in small “island” communities like Grass Valley and Nevada City. In large part, this tension centers on the management of boundaries: “How do I say ‘no’ when I’m overwhelmed, or when I clearly haven’t devoted enough time to my family, job, or even my private life?” “What about the boundaries that separate my paid from my voluntary work, and when does one bleed into the other?” “How do I find time to really connect with other people?” “How do I set boundaries when I am always available by email or cell phone? In the age of texting and twittering, how do I find time to be off the grid? “How do I find quality time with my partner, my children, and my friends? We no longer leave work at 5 pm, and we no longer devote our evenings to family life.” When is *my* down time?” The emerging sage leaders find that setting clear and consistent boundaries is very elusive—especially in the age of electronic technology. It is always a tenuous balance! Personal life, work life, and civic engagement all seem to flow into one another, and what was once seen as definitive boundaries blur and merge.

Boundary management is not about giving-up time or relationships. And it is not about money, lost opportunities, or better pay in the private sector. As one emerging sage notes, “Once you raise your hand in this community, you are going to get sucked into many activities. You are going to get pulled into things that you did not necessarily anticipate.” Many of the emerging sages are involved in civic engagements that focus on sustaining the natural environment. Ironically, they recognize they need to manage boundaries in their own lives if they are going to sustain boundaries that affect their civic commitments. So in the end, sustainability becomes a goal at many levels.

### **The Nature of Sacrifice III: From Success to Significance**

The challenge of managing boundaries seems to be based in part on a change in the priorities set by emerging leaders as they move into the second half of their lives. Their commitment to family might remain strong when they reach mid-age, but there is also a shift in the concern they have about the nature and quality of work they are doing. We know from considerable research on adult development that many young adults are ambitious and tend to identify self-worth in terms of personal and professional success: being singled out for recognition, getting a pay raise or promotion, being elected to public office or appointed to a prestigious committee. As these men



and women mature, a gradual but sometimes dramatic change occurs. They begin to focus not on their personal and professional success but on achieving something that is significant outside themselves. This is about leaving a legacy, about being “good for the world” rather than just being “good in the world.”

We also know something about what aides and what hinders this shift from personal and professional success to a higher level of significance. A key is the support of important others in one’s life: If the partner doesn’t understand or encourage this shift to significance, then potential emerging sages are likely to pull back and remain engaged in the pursuit of personal success. And in the process they are likely to risk becoming stagnant rather than generative. If friends, co-workers, and neighbors don’t appreciate the new priorities of emerging sages, and tell them they are losing their competitive edge, they are likely to fall back into old patterns—begrudge the success of others. Research suggests that it truly does take a community to help sage leaders find new purpose and energy in their lives, and to help them transition from focusing on success and self-achievement to significance—probably the single factor that most leads to an enduring legacy.

Research literature suggests that the management of boundaries is critical in moving from success to significance. If emerging leaders don’t devote time, attention, and energy to significant others in their lives, how can they expect their partners to support their shift to significance—and the often accompanying de-emphasis on pay and promotion? If other members of the emerging leader’s family don’t really understand the importance of the emerging leader’s civic engagement, how can they be expected to willingly sacrifice their time with the emerging leader or forgo their own priorities—like owning a home, having a second child, traveling, or saving for retirement? More than one emerging sage observes with regret that he gave up so much earlier in his adult life that he now feels he can’t adequately provide for his family. If emerging sage leaders don’t pay enough attention to sustaining their own physical and mental health, they won’t be able to sustain a commitment to significance beyond personal ambition. In many ways, self-sacrifice is among the most selfish of life styles, for it can’t be sustained and often results in personal regret and enduring resentment among those in the lives of emerging sage leaders who are most important.



