

What are the Benefits for Senior Sage Leaders?

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It's the feeling that I'm not alone. The thread that goes through everyone's story is what makes me know that we aren't alone. Senior Sage Leader

Four themes define the benefits that senior sages believe they receive from their civic involvements. Like emerging sage colleagues, they believe their most valued benefit is personal fulfillment:

The greatest personal benefit I receive from my civic involvements here is that I have been able to play-out several of my passions. If you have a passion for something you want to see it grow and be successful. That's what I am getting out of my civic involvements.

Making these concerts and music available, and the way it's done, gives me a feeling of real accomplishment. It also makes me feel that in some way, through the arts, we're making this a better place to live. That is quite fulfilling.

I've gotten a tremendous amount of personal satisfaction from what I've done. When the Center for the Arts opened, we did all of our shows in the small Van Gogh room because we couldn't use the main theater. It's been so cool to bring great artists to town. There's a warmth that overrides the faults.

Building personal relationships is another perceived benefit that senior sages receive from their civic engagements:

I really don't know how my life could be lived without these involvements and commitments. I've been doing this stuff since I was a kid and don't know any other way to function. I also know something about myself: It's not what I do or the accolades I receive that counts but who I am, my core being that feeds me.

The personal benefits that I get out of it are really great. Number one is social interaction, which we all know is important as we begin to age. There are also the friendships I have made. It has really opened-up the whole community to my wife and me, and that is very gratifying for us.

One of the benefits is just getting to know people in the community. Another is being acknowledged and respected and seeing that I can help in a lot of places. It keeps me energized, active, and creative. I don't play tennis and other stuff like that. Maybe I should, but my civic involvement is what inspires me and gives me my life.

A sense of satisfaction and belonging are what I get out of my civic involvements. On a lot of levels, I'm rather hermit-like and not very social. Even though I'm not always a good friend in reaching out to people, I feel so connected when we're together. For example, I love all of the people on the Center for Nonprofit Leadership board, and that's great and really fun.

First of all there is a feeling of relevance. I think it is very dangerous for anyone not to feel relevant. I also get a lot of reinforcement from people who are happy with the contributions they believe that I make. And I've gotten to know a lot of good people who I would never have known without my community involvements.

For many senior sage leaders, what motivates them and the benefits they receive from their civic involvements are one-in-the same—helping others:

The greatest benefit comes from seeing families turn around their lives from drugs and acquiring parenting skills.

Take Habit for Humanity as an example. I work with a group of friends I have made within a Habitat construction crew. We go out and hammer nails and get a lot done while also having a good time. Best of all, we are helping families to have a nice home. What can beat that?

There is a fourth benefit that senior sages identify from their civic involvements, and it is community betterment:

I feel I have been able to give back to the community that has given so much to our family.

I hope I am bringing value to organizations that are contributing to the overall benefit of the community. When I first came here I saw what people were trying to do, and I'm proud of living in this area. I've always been one to practice what I preach, help out if I can to make the community even better. I volunteer for both little things and big things.

I believe nonprofit organizations improve the quality of our community life, and that's why I find my work with them fulfilling.

My wife and I have been involved with others in growing the arts, and 32 years ago there wasn't much here. Now the arts are flourishing. Yes, our main theatre, which I loved, closed, but we still have three or four other active theatre companies. And we have two premier and very active musical organizations, leaving aside the other music organizations here that seem endless. So we have a community that is physically beautiful, somewhat remote, but has a rich cultural life.

And there are two other benefits—intergenerational bestowal and sound physical and mental health:

The benefits I get from my civic involvements are personal fulfillment and self-actualization. But there is also the benefit that comes from generativity, the desire to want to leave something behind of lasting value. We have to connect with the young. They need us and we need them, and we have much to learn from one another. And there is a fourth benefit: sound physical and mental health. Our civic involvement in the organizations we love helps to prolong our lives by keeping our minds sharp and by fighting off the anxiety and depression that often come with the awareness of pending death.

What Are the Benefits I: Community Service

Like their emerging counterparts, senior sage leaders often speak of engaging the community through their volunteer work – the sense of belonging to a great cause that brings them together with kindred spirits. Their commitments and passions are especially exhibited and fulfilled through their favored organizations. They feel worthy and worthwhile because they have something to give, and their talents and experiences are recognized by others. Senior sages realize with pride that they possess the skills and motivation to make a difference, and to find others with whom they can share their experiences through collaboration. These colleagues possess complementary skills and also offer opportunities for senior sage leaders to build new and enduring friendships.

What are the Benefits II: Oxytocin and Community Bonding

We know from recent neurobiological research that a particular neurotransmitter called “oxytocin” is more common in human beings than in any other species. These neurotransmitters play a central role in the desire and capacity of human beings to bond with one another. While women tend to have higher concentrations of oxytocin than men, the levels in men increase with age. This offers a sound explanation for senior sage leaders of both genders greatly valuing the opportunity to come together with colleagues who share common interests, and who engage in collaborative efforts on behalf of the Grass Valley and Nevada City communities.

Senior sages are fully aware that they benefit their community, and this knowledge is itself a benefit. And then there is the benefit that some senior sages get from the Center for Nonprofit

Leadership (CNL), which operates at the “meta-level” of community development. CNL offers leadership seminars and workshops that enable senior sage leaders to “learn new things,” and this highly personal learning is seen by many as a major benefit. We know from research being done in the area of neuroplasticity which human beings at all ages can alter the structure and dynamics of their brain through new learning—whether it be a second language or the opportunity to engage in a different form of leadership.

Senior sages report that the education and knowledge dissemination that takes place in CNL workshops empowers them to be much more effective within their favored civic organizations; many say they couldn’t do as good a job of providing volunteer leadership and service without these programs. And through leadership seminars CNL has enabled senior sages—many of whom came from corporate life and leadership—to learn the vocabulary and best practices of the nonprofit world. These seminars help senior sages to reflect on their leadership styles and practices, and they also facilitate the expansion of self-knowledge and the capacity for senior sages to transfer lessons learned in an earlier part of their lives to their current civic involvements. Together with mentoring, CNL educational programs simultaneously provide opportunities for dialogue and serve as a bridge for the movement of senior sages into the Twin Town communities and the world of sagacious nonprofit leadership.

What Are the Benefits III: Finding Generativity During the Senior Years

Senior sage leaders often say they benefit greatly from the sense that they are leaving their community in a better place than they found it. Clearly, they feel they are leaving a mark on the community’s quality of life. One senior sage puts it succinctly: “I’m just proud to live here.” But there seems to be much more to appreciate from the benefits derived by senior sages when they become generative during their senior years. We note that many senior sages say they had become isolated in their early retirement due to being “burned-out” from years of corporate, nonprofit, or government politics. So it is understandable that some senior sages retreated into themselves and became “curmudgeons” at first. Then in time, they discovered that they are experiencing personal stagnation and look for opportunities to become vital again. The research on increased oxytocin levels in mature men and women suggests that isolation can be quite destructive to both physical and mental health. And as the MacArthur studies have shown, men

and women who become isolated during their senior years tend to deteriorate faster and die sooner than those who are socially engaged.

Many previously isolated senior sages have found that their civic engagements pulled them back into the world. This ultimately may be the greatest benefit that is derived from civic engagement. Rather than their volunteer work being regarded as a source of tension or sacrifice, these senior sages discoverer that civic work can integrate very nicely with family and recreational interests. The first step out of withdrawal and isolation is often the most difficult, but once engaged in the community these seniors acquired new energy and renewed purpose. And they gain a real sense of balance in their lives. Further, senior sages say they feel better after providing community service (physical benefits) and feel intellectually stimulated (mental benefits). And they benefit greatly from the camaraderie of their fellow sage leaders (interpersonal benefits). Put simply, senior sage leaders find that civic work in Grass Valley and Nevada City feeds not only their spirit but their entire being.