

The Uninvolved Public: Perspectives of the Emerging Sage Leaders

Gary Quehl and William Bergquist

I think people get wrapped-up in their own world. They have busy lives with their jobs and family life. And you can't force people to get out of their home and away from their Nintendo, TV, or golf. Emerging Sage Leader

Thus far we have explored the civic engagement of the Sage100 from a number of perspectives: how they help their favored civic organizations, the roadblocks they face in leading, their most meaningful and satisfying experiences, what motivates them, whether their civic engagements involve sacrifice, and the perceived benefits they receive from their civic engagements. Now we ask these sage leaders to speculate on why some potential sage leaders are not actively involved in our community by raising two questions: Why do some members of the community who possess sage leadership qualities choose not to become civically engaged? What, if anything, can or should be done about it? Answers offered by sage leaders to the first question are the subject of this essay (focusing on the perspectives of the emerging sage leaders) and the next essay (focusing on the perspectives of the senior sage leaders).

The leading reason that emerging sages give to the issue of civic non-involvement is that many persons who possess sage leadership qualities are engaged in demanding, high pressure jobs or absorbed in meeting family obligations; these two activities simply capture all available time and passion. Emerging sages offer three additional reasons. One is that the very difficult economic and emotional times in which we live simply discourage risking time and energy in civic endeavors. Another is that there are quiet ways to serve others which tend to fly under the radar, and a third is the belief that civic engagement necessarily involves “politics,” which many persons abhor.

Work, Family, Time

For many potential emerging sages, family and work priorities translate into a lack of time and disinclination toward civic engagement at this stage of their lives:

Everyone will tell you that it's about the time it takes. In my social circle both parents are working, and that makes a big difference. Dads are much more involved and expected to be partners in raising their children—certainly more than my parent's generation. Parents are usually involved in their first community of interest, which is their children's school. I think that when they become older, they branch out into other community service activities.

I believe a lot of them don't get involved civically because it gets all consuming and takes away from their family, work commitments, and leisure time enjoyments. I would never want that to happen to me. As a young person, I realize my interests lie more with myself, my family, and my career than with the whole community. I think that an interest in things civic comes later in life.

Difficult Times

There is a belief that just trying to hang on during these difficult economic times has produced tremendous emotional drain for many potential emerging sages:

The thing that really makes me sad is that it is a difficult time for people economically and emotionally. People are so concerned with day-to-day needs that they don't feel free enough to step into the public arena and make a contribution. If people's basic needs were taken care of, there would be much more contributing to the greater community.

There is a lot of stress in the community right now because of the economy, so many young people feel the best thing they can be doing is taking care of themselves in any way that they can.

Civic Engagement Under the Radar

Civic involvement does not only mean being on a nonprofit board or running for public office:

I think a lot of folks are involved, but we don't consider it civic engagement. They are raising their kids, taking them to softball, going to PTA. Others are doing what they do quietly, and some just aren't sure how to be involved.

Often times many young people may be working in smaller microcosms and not be seen as heavily involved in civic life. It's important to recognize that many people are contributing to their communities by raising good, healthy families.

I think there are a lot of ways for someone to contribute to our community and to the higher good. In many cases, it may not be through civic organizations. For example, a meditation teacher contributes a lot to the community even though he or she isn't on a nonprofit board of directors or in a traditional leadership role.

There are ways of being a quiet leader in our community, of leading by example, though not necessarily taking on one of the more conventional leadership roles.

Wariness about the Political Arena

The temper of the times reflects a great deal of uncivil discourse, especially in the political arena. This can be off-putting to potential emerging sage leaders who may possess qualities for political leadership:

I believe that most people are intimidated by the political process because it is seen as intrusive and ugly. Most people don't realize that it doesn't take a lot to get involved and get elected. And they also don't understand that once they are involved, they can really bring about change at the local level.

Some folks I know were remarkable community leaders in the past but have burned out. Sometimes they come and help in the background. Others have stepped forward, but they

have been so beaten-up for their involvement or views that they don't feel it is worth becoming engaged again.

I know from my experience in politics that you take a lot of criticism and you're a target sometimes. People publically speculate whether you are self-serving or working for the betterment of the community, so I think some people just don't want to open themselves to this kind of scrutiny and criticism. Others see public scrutiny as a detriment to their business because the decisions that are made make people mad sometimes. And some people don't want to expose their family to that kind of thing either.

Other Reasons for Civic Disengagement

There are additional reasons that emerging sage leaders give as to why other potential sages aren't civically involved. Some people lack self-confidence, or feel they can't make a difference, or don't know where to start, or believe that access to community leadership is limited to but a few:

I think that life is busy, and it is hard for people to keep-up with their own life issues. Some people feel they can't or don't want to make a difference, so they need an opportunity to get involved and understand that by taking action they can get their issues prioritized. In any event, we need to combat apathy.

I've been looking at the age group between 18 and 24 and wondering how to engage them. We're not really teaching them the path of civic engagement or giving them tools, and we need to find a way to do this. Young people don't feel they have anything to give, or don't know how to give if they do.

I think some people don't have the confidence to get involved. I know there are people who have great ideas, but they get stuck in the role of wife or mother and can't move beyond to other arenas.

There is a perception that community leadership is a closed network. The same people seem to rotate through boards, and it is difficult to break in.

Other potential emerging sages are thought not to want the responsibility, or have the patience, or are afraid of group settings, or simply haven't found the right civic activity to connect with their interests:

Yeah, I know people for whom the community would benefit from their involvement. Usually their lack of civic engagement is because they don't want the responsibility or they're fearful of it.

I think some people hold great leadership skills in their own little world. You know, there are team sports and then there are sports that are just you against the world. It is a matter of being afraid of commitment and what it is going to entail.

I struggle with this because I feel there are people with more talent than me, and yet they choose not to be involved. Sometimes it takes so much effort and time to get things done, and they don't have the patience for it. Looking at what happens in our community, it seems more like a 1 to 99 principle instead of the 80/20 rule. Things get done by 1% of the people, but this also means you can make a big difference if you are part of that 1%.

People like me get involved in projects about which they feel not only interest but passion. I think people need to find the right activity so they don't burn out. I also think that many people are at the top of their profession, which means that they need to put a lot of extra time into their work.

Then there are those potential emerging sages who simply enjoy partying or have a feeling of entitlement that the community's work will get done without their involvement:

Maybe there's a part of community involvement that's not cool with the younger crowd who are out partying. In that case, the question becomes, "How do you make it attractive

for young people to get involved?” I think you need a bridge-person to rally their friends to become involved.

Sometimes I think it’s a lack of a philanthropic spirit or understanding. I’m pretty shocked about how few people in my core group of friends are civic-minded. They volunteer in their kids’ school, but that’s pretty much it. It’s amazing to me because there’s an incredible older generation here who do volunteer, but not my generation so much.

Emerging sages suggest there are different planes of community involvement. It is not a matter of being engaged or not engaged, but of level and degree of involvement. All kinds of contributions are being made by community members—perhaps not in as grand a manner as serving on a nonprofit board, but still important. They’re participating in a bake sale or giving a day of service to their church. They might not be heading an organization, but they make a phone call and work a couple hours here and there. And they serve the community indirectly by raising children and supporting their education. One of the hallmarks of Grass Valley and Nevada City, therefore, is the wide range of community activities and levels of participation.

Priorities and Schedules

Given their reluctance to put people in binary categories, emerging sage leaders comment on the differing priorities that mid-life persons in Twin Towns have. At this point in their lives many serious-minded adults believe it is enough to raise children in a caring and supportive manner. Or simply in being a decent and caring human being. This may add as much to the vitality of the community as high-level civic involvement. Not everyone is meant to be the leader of a team or the spokesperson for a cause.

There is also the matter of schedules. People with a 9 to 5 job are not able to attend a 3 pm meeting chaired by a retired person. And they are unable to schedule family life while actively engaged in community activities. Many persons spend most of their time just trying to survive and put food on their family’s table. They may have many wonderful talents to share but, sadly, don’t have the time because they are holding down two jobs or doing part-time work on the side

to eke out a decent living. There simply is no room in their schedule for becoming engaged in the community's civic issues.

Knowledge, Access, and Vulnerability

Some barriers to civic engagement are psychological rather than being about personal priorities and schedules. They are about fear of rejection, appearing ill-informed, or the fear of losing a private life. For many people in Grass Valley and Nevada City, the fundamental issue is they don't know "how" to get involved. With some justification, they sometimes view the current volunteer community as a closed system and don't feel invited to join in. Others may feel insecure about becoming involved in an organization that is dominated by "old-timers" who understand how to get things done, and know what the leverage points are for undertaking community change. These "new kids on the block" feel awkward and alone. They don't feel included or fully appreciated, so they ask, "Why go through the agony?"

Those who are not involved also may feel vulnerable, and this comes in several different forms. They might knock on the door and not be allowed in, or they may find they are ill-informed about the issues they are being asked to address. Alternatively, they may be invited in and find their life has been taken over by the cause and has become part of the public arena. Obviously, if they are elected to public office their private life is always in some jeopardy. Even if not elected to office, those who are civically engaged are subjected to scrutiny and may feel there is nowhere to hide.

Given the times in which we live, there is no guarantee of civil dialogue in the community. And there is the existential vulnerability that comes with risking hope for community improvement. In fact, some who are not civically involved are thought to feel despair and conclude that nothing can be gained from engaging in what seems to be a hopeless cause. These knowledgeable men and women fully appreciate the enormity of problems that their community now faces, but they ask themselves, "What can I possibly do? Why try something when I know it will fail?" This theme seems particularly prominent among those young leaders who have given up hope about changes being made in sustaining the natural environment.