

The Uninvolved Public: Perspectives of the Senior Sage Leaders

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I have run across people who have sage qualities but aren't engaged civically. Some are burned-out, either by being used too much or by becoming disenchanted with what they were working on and who they were working with. Senior Sage Leader

Because the time that most senior sages have isn't invested as much in work and family as emerging sages, many point to different reasons that more seniors with sage qualities aren't civically involved in the community. Three head their list: burn-out, fatigue, and personal traps; other interests and activities that are found to be more satisfying; and self-centeredness.

Burn-Out, Fatigue and Personal Traps

Many potential senior sages are thought to be exhausted from a lifetime of responsibility and hard work; understandably, they now want others to assume responsibility for the community's civic life:

I think some of these people have worked so damn hard all of their lives that their idea is, "I've done it. I just want to fish and relax and let someone else carry the load."

Others are discouraged because they possess conservative values and are greatly bothered by some of what they see today. So rather than trying to change things they just withdraw and say, "Screw it."

With some I have seen an attitude that says, "I am retired now. I did that all of my work life and don't want to do it anymore." This is a difficult barrier to overcome because you have to honor their desires, and it is their life choice at this stage.

One major reason is unplanned personal traps that people can slide into, and that prevent them from becoming civically engaged. For some, for instance, golfing all day and drinking heavily in the evening can make the music leave retirement and lead to disappointment, despair, and depression rather than to a healthy and active life.

Other Interests and Activities

Of course, civic involvement is not everyone's cup of tea. After a lifetime of work and commitment, many persons who possess senior sage leadership qualities are involved in other things that bring them joy:

From what I've observed, a lot of people come here and very shortly develop a rich and full life without volunteering. They're on the golf course or on the tennis court or in restaurants enjoying themselves. Yes, there are so many retirees with all of this valuable experience, but they have a full life and don't take the next step and volunteer.

I suspect some are involved in many things other than nonprofit leadership. In other words, they have personal interests they get heavily into that take-up their time. They may feel they don't need the potential rewards that can come from working with a nonprofit organization. And since they may not have had this experience, they don't know what they are missing.

One characteristic of the talented but uninvolved is that they tend to have a very narrow field of interest. They are just focused on their boat or are in their garage doing wood work, and that's it. They were very successful in business. That was their sole focus in life, and they got fulfillment from it. As these kinds of people get older, they tend to become very entrenched with their computer or playing golf with their buddies on Friday.

Self-Centeredness

Some individuals who possess senior sage leader qualities are believed to be so wrapped-up in themselves that they see little reason to invest in others or in civic betterment:

Many people are just self-centered and never take their heads out of the foxhole unless it involves self-interest. Maybe some people just don't care. They want to sit back and let others do the community work.

Some people come here, leave their problems behind, take care of themselves, and stick their head in the sand – there's some of that here. I've always thought there should be a toll booth when you come up Highway 49 where people are stopped and requested to say, "This is who I am, this is what I have to offer, and these are my interests."

I don't think that with the senior sage level we are talking about you can entice someone into a civic leadership role successfully who doesn't already show evidence they are so inclined. The "ah-ha" for civic leadership has to come during the formative years. If someone doesn't donate, doesn't participate, doesn't lend a hand, then they are unlikely to be drawn in by others, at least in a serious way, or for very long.

Other Reasons for Civic Disengagement

Senior sage leaders identify an additional series of reasons that more seniors aren't civically involved. Some may think they can't make a difference, or don't know how to get involved, or lack confidence in leading:

Often people feel that they don't have what's going to be needed, or that they really can't make a difference. The truth is, there is a place for everyone.

Some don't know how to get involved, and others lack confidence and simply don't think they can do what is required. And, of course, there are those who are engaged but don't want or aren't able to lead.

Then there may be corporate retirees who either are not comfortable operating without an authoritative title or have reservations about working with unpaid volunteers:

Some people from the corporate world here are not comfortable operating without the kind of “stripes” that automatically give them leadership status.

I have several friends who are very capable leaders but have chosen not to get involved civically with our community. There appear to be a number of probable reasons for this. One is that they were very successful in the corporate world but have reservations about their ability to handle the frustrations of working with volunteers or leading them.

And there are those who aren't involved because they don't see the value or have yet to connect civically with a personal passion:

People who are at the senior stage of their lives and don't become involved fail to understand the value of 'doing for others.' Simply put, they are takers, and ultimately they lose.

One key reason is that many people haven't found an involvement that creates passion for them. Or they may not see the value of involvement or may have lost passion for it and need to be brought back. Sometimes people work hard for something for a long time and then get tired of it, so the freshness is lost. It doesn't mean they can't be brought back in different ways, however.

Finally, there may be seniors who either need time to recoup their energy and interest or who have not yet reached a point where they are ready for civic engagement:

I think some people have the issue of going overboard and getting very tired. They need to find time and space to replenish and achieve a balance in their lives. No matter if it's working with a Hospice patient or handling the mail, forty hours a week is more than plenty.

After retiring I informed my wife that my first year was going to be given to enjoying our beautiful environment here. And I did that. Then I decided I was ready and acted on my belief that there is more to life than fishing and playing tennis and golf. So I got involved.

Virtually all the senior sages know persons in the community who possess sage leadership qualities but are far removed from being civically engaged. Senior sages describe them as affable, generous, and knowledgeable persons but voice frustration in not being able to motivate them: “So why can’t I get them involved? Why don’t they readily recognize the personal benefits that can come from civic engagement? Why don’t they perk-up when I say that my soul is being fed by the volunteer work I am doing? I care about these people and know that civic engagement can offer a wonderful path to renewed physical, mental and even spiritual health.” Senior sages wish they had answers to these questions and speculate about possible reasons for non-engagement.

Fear and Isolation

For some, it is about fear. Fear of putting themselves out there in a civic organization and getting stuck in a mess of complex, all-consuming challenges. Fear of being asked to do something they feel they can’t do, either because of time constraints or lack of direct experience. Perhaps they are tired and find relief in getting away from the politics in which they once worked and often served as leaders for many years. It is reasonable to ask, then, why anyone would want to get drawn back into this milieu when they can go fishing with their buddies or plant flowers in solitude: “If I get involved and my commitment grows too large, how do I get out of it and reclaim my personal life?” “It is much easier to find friendships in leisure time activities than build them through civic networks.” “If I am not making money, why would I do it? Why would I do the same thing again, but this time for free?” It is understandable that uninvolved seniors may judge civic work to involve sacrifice if they can’t see its personal or community benefits. Unfortunately, they don’t or can’t yet understand that civic involvement is a different kind of work that has its own rewards.

Perhaps it is a lack of connections in the community. Many senior men and women moved to Grass Valley or Nevada City in recent years and don’t yet know many people. They are on the

outside of the core community looking in, and no one has asked them to participate in a volunteer activity. Or they may feel that what they have to contribute to their new community won't be valued.

In other instances, new arrivals have moved into gated communities where they get into a year-in-and-year-out routine of playing golf or bridge all day, drinking with friends in the evening, and watching a bit of TV before falling asleep. Their friendship network becomes limited to other residents in the gated community who share the same values and hold dear the same life priorities. So, their lives outside this community become limited to shopping, banking, and attending the occasional theatrical or musical performance. While these potential sage leaders do have a "community" it is highly restricted, lacking in diversity or much soul-feeding attraction—at least from the perspective of the senior sage leaders who were interviewed. It should not be surprising that this life-style can become numbing and lead to stagnation and despair as the aging process unfolds.

Life Experiences and Priorities

Another factor might be life experiences. Potential civic leaders may never have had the kind of challenges and support in their lives that motivate them to want to give back to others. They declare, "I don't do that," and set aside any possibility that they will taste the benefits of civic involvement during their senior years. In some instances these seniors have "grown up" in corporate culture and don't want to start over in learning how to work and be influential in the culture of nonprofit organizations. They had "stripes," clear status, in the corporate world, but this doesn't translate to the nonprofit world of volunteers unless it is earned. Often these seniors may not have had a history of public service in their own families of origin. That might make sense if it were not for the fact that many of the project's senior sage leaders also had no tradition of civic engagement in their early lives; their parents were farmers who lived a long way from town, or they grew up in economically-challenged families that had no discretionary time for anything but income-generating work. Somehow these senior sage leaders learned the value of civic engagement without having had parental role models. It is interesting to muse about why and how these men and women discovered the benefits of voluntary service to their community.

Perhaps the lack of civic involvement on the part of some seniors is simply a matter of priorities. Other things going on in the lives of uninvolved seniors are deemed more important. This doesn't make them selfish human beings, but a lack of motivating experiences does make them less inclined to serve other people and therefore more difficult to interest in things civic. As one senior sage observes, "It may be essential to get involved in civic activities right after moving here, and this involvement should not be short-term or superficial." The lesson: If you are just pouring drinks at a Music in the Mountains event, this might not be enough to motivate significant community involvement—and not enough to yield the tangible benefits of civic engagement. On the other hand, small investments of time and energy may, in fact, eventually lead to something bigger. One never knows.

There are so many questions and so few answers about why senior men and women who possess sage leadership qualities are not civically involved in Twin Towns. Answers will have to await future conversations with those who are not yet civically inclined.