

SENIOR LEADERSHIP IN COMMUNITY: INTERVIEW WITH TOM CROSS

You have been identified by friends and colleagues as one of our community's 50 top senior sage leaders. A sage leader is a person who brings *unusual experience, sound judgment, and wisdom* in working to advance the civic well-being of our community. We thank you for participating in our interview process.

- 1. To begin, how many years have you lived in Nevada County, and where in the county do you reside?**

We came part-time in 1989 and have lived here full-time since 1997. We reside in Lake Wildwood in Penn Valley.

- 2. Are you working, semi-retired, or retired? May I ask how old you are?**

I am retired and am 69 years old.

- 3. If you would, please share a bit about your personal history: where you grew-up; where you went to school and college; what organizations you have worked for and the positions you have held.**

I was born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1941 and my family moved to Los Angeles when I was one year old. We lived there until the Harbor Freeway was built and then moved to the suburbs of San Gabriel Valley, where there were track homes and orange groves. I went to grammar school there and high school as well and graduated when I was 16. From there I went to junior college for a year and then on to Cal Poly in Pomona for four years. During this time I did as many sports as I could and worked constantly at every job imaginable.

During my senior year in college I worked for General Dynamics in Pomona and graduated in 1963 with a BS in Electrical Engineering. I then went to work as an electronics engineer for Bell Labs in Massachusetts, which was part of the Bell System. While there they sent me to Boston where I got my Masters in Electrical Engineering. I started on an MBA at NYU but didn't finish because I kept being transferred every couple of years.

From Bell Labs I went to AT&T headquarters in Manhattan in a staff position. Then I returned to the Bell Labs as a supervisor of an engineering design group, after which I returned to New Jersey to work at AT&T headquarters again and decided to stay in that part of the business. I liked the bigger picture than I had just designing stuff. I was at AT&T headquarters for a few years, and they put me on a career track to expose me to the operating side of the Bell System. Until that time I had only seen the R&D side. Around 1978, I went to New Jersey Bell as

General Manager of Sales and got promoted to Vice president for Marketing. Then I went to C&P Telephone Company in Washington, DC, where I became Vice President of Business Services.

At the time of the AT&T divestiture I was responsible for what they called the Mid-Atlantic Region for AT&T. This involved managing all of the stuff in a seven state region that stayed with AT&T. All of the rest stayed with the divested local operating companies. In the latter part of 1984, after the break-up, I was transferred to California to run the Western fourteen states for AT&T. I did that for a few years, and then decided to resign from AT&T—something few had ever done before at the corporate officer level. I went to work for Pacific Telesis, which was the holding company for Pacific Bell. I started there as Vice President and Treasurer, which at that time was a \$20 billion firm. And then I went to Pacific Bell and ran most of Northern California operations including, installations, engineering, business office, construction, human resources, etc. After that they broke the company into four business units, and I ran the one of the two for Northern California. I retired in 1997 at age 55.

I had a very rich career. Perhaps I wasn't an expert at any one thing, but I learned across a wide range of experiences. I majored in engineering when I went to college because I wanted to take the most difficult courses that were available. I went through the catalog and checked those that seemed most challenging and proceeded to take them. I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. Ultimately, this experience gave me a range of knowledge to apply throughout my career in the various positions I held. Even when I had no prior experience in a new job, I was able to work it through mentally. I wouldn't change a thing in terms of how my career unfolded—other than the break-up of the Bell System, which started things down hill for a lot of good people.

4. Is there a history of community service in your family background? If so, how would you describe it?

No, not really. We were probably lower middle class. My mother was a housewife with five kids, and my dad worked 70 hours a week. Because there wasn't much time for anything else, I never saw them involved in any civic activities. And other than being wonderful parents, my mother and father never gave us kids the example of what we eventually became. Three of my four siblings are the same that I try to be—very giving people. There is something in our DNA that has made us like this. My siblings don't have much in the way of financial resources, but they are all very giving of their personal time and talents. Whenever I talk with them they are doing something more for people. They're truly amazing.

5. **What do you consider to be the major strengths and capabilities that have made you an effective community leader? Are they rooted in action, in your personal style, in your organizational, political, and personal relationships, or in something else?**

I am highly focused, which makes some people uncomfortable. And I have a lot of good experience, which applies to most things I am involved in—whether finance or marketing or human resources issues. I only get involved in things I have a passion for, so as leader I always have passion for the mission of organizations in which I am involved. I can be very engaging with people I don't make nervous. And I am very good at mustering and putting together resources to get things done. My greatest weakness is that I can be impatient. I can wait out people only for so long, and I then just lose patience. This sometimes gets in my way.

6. **There are five key roles that civic leaders often play in their community:**

- ***Mentor:*** teaching and engaging others
- ***Mediator:*** helping to resolve conflict
- ***Monitor:*** serving as a community watchdog
- ***Mobilizer:*** working to bring about change
- ***Motivator:*** urging people to pursue worthy goals

As you think about your own involvement in our community, which of these roles have you played and which do you consider to be your strongest?

I do a lot of mentoring, and I'm also involved in mobilizing and motivating others. I can't say that I'm skilled at or involved much in mediation and monitoring.

7. **This project has to do with the involvement of sage leaders like yourself in civic organizations that seek to improve the quality of life and well-being of Grass Valley and Nevada City. This includes nine types of civic organizations:**

- **Fraternal and service clubs**
- **Social services organizations**
- **Educational organizations**
- **Governmental and political organizations**
- **Arts organizations**
- **Media organizations**
- **Faith-based organizations**
- **Environmental organizations**
- **Other nonprofit organizations**

In which of the nine types of civic organizations on the list are you *currently* involved? Overall, how many total hours a month do you give to these organizations?

I am currently involved in four organizations. One is Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Another is the Friendly Visitor Program, where I visit an elderly gentleman once a week. A third is the local Hospital Board. Then there is the Lake Wildwood Association, which is a homeowner's association group and where I have served on various committees. Overall, I spend about 30 hours a month on these activities, not including commuting time—which for me is not a trivial issue because I can't go anywhere roundtrip from Wildwood in less than an hour.

8. **What is the name of the *one* organization on the list in which you are most involved and committed?...Were you invited to become involved or did you approach the organization and volunteer your services? Are you paid or unpaid? On average, how many hours a month do you give to this organization?**

The Board of Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital, which is associated with Catholic Healthcare West Hospital System, is my top priority. I sought becoming a member, and in time I was invited to join the Board. This is my third year on the board, and I spend about 20 of my 30 hours with it. One of the reason so much of my time is with the hospital board is that I represent our local board on a CHW Board Committee which has quarterly meetings in San Francisco and sometimes out-of-state retreats. So every quarter I burn a minimum of 24 hours outside our community.

9. **I'd like to learn more about your involvement in the organization by asking four questions:**

First, describe the leadership role that you play within the organization.

My formal leadership roles these past three years have been to serve as the Board's Strategic Planning Liaison and as Chair of the Board Development Committee. My informal leadership role has been to serve on the Finance Committee and Quality Committee and provide guidance on how these Committees can focus on the issues most important to Board Governance.

Second, in what other ways do you believe you have *most* helped the organization?

As the Strategic Planning Liaison I worked to get the Board and Staff to align on the future direction of the Hospital. The final work product was

called Vision 2015. The process of formulating the document created good dialog but hasn't necessarily been a driving force in our subsequent deliberations.

The Board Development Committee was able to develop an outstanding slate of candidates, some of which have joined the Board. However, the Board didn't fully embrace going outside our comfort level in terms of candidates from a broader geography or skill set.

The CFO prepared a Five Year Cash Flow spreadsheet at my request that was very helpful in assuring we could afford the numerous initiatives the Hospital has undertaken in the past three years.

At my request the Quality Committee agreed to have a Quality Vision section for each Board Agenda, but we haven't yet fully accomplished my goal of surfacing what policies, processes, technology, and training are necessary to achieve and sustain a high level of performance. The Hospital performs quite well through its normal approach; I'm just trying to uncover additional means of taking it to another level and sustaining the gains.

Third, as you think back over your involvement in the organization, what *roadblocks* have been most challenging?

Volunteer governance has inherent roadblocks. It is very difficult to "beam-in" a cadre of volunteers once a month to deliberate complex issues when these people have a wide range of knowledge, commitment, and beliefs. The Hospital Staff provide in-depth, complex materials to the Board each month, and we deal with them as best we can. In the end, the Board is mostly used to review and vote on matters brought to our attention by the Staff. I would prefer that the Board provide thoughtful advice and counsel to the Staff, as well as engage in a broader set of community-wide health issues.

Fourth, what experiences within the organization have given you the *most* meaning and satisfaction?

I have enjoyed learning about the healthcare issues facing our community and country through my involvement with the Hospital and my quarterly meetings at CHW's Headquarters. I have also enjoyed getting to know the Hospital Staff and my fellow Board Members. Hopefully my involvement has been of some benefit to the Hospital, though it feels relatively minimal at times. I would feel more satisfied if the Board were to broaden its role to periodically assess the overall health of the community and how the Hospital can expand its contributions to an integrated healthcare system in Nevada County. I intend to try to expand our Board's focus as part of the Strategic Planning activity this Fall.

10. I want to ask you three additional questions about your civic involvements in our community:

First, what motivates or inspires you to engage in community activities and causes?

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 to get things accomplished in our community. When I retired young at 55 my goal was to provide time, talent, and treasure for our community. There probably is something about personal ego as well. It's nice to be well-known in our community and to know others in the same way. I don't think ego is a driving force for me, but on occasion I like that side of it is because it is personally reassuring.

Second, do you feel that you are sacrificing anything in your life by being deeply involved in our community's civic organizations?

Nope. Not with the time and energy that I have invested. I only regret that I haven't been more successful—not that I haven't tried. The trying has been very worthwhile.

Third, what personal benefits do you get from your civic involvements?

On occasion I get a sense of gratification—when something clicks, when I feel really good about having done something useful. But more often something doesn't click, and I don't feel good about that. I probably have been more frustrated and disappointed than not—perhaps because many of my visions and goals haven't materialized.

11. One of the benefits of growing older is that we are increasingly able to reflect on our experiences and to learn from them. Have you found any patterns of personal behavior no longer useful in your leadership role? Is so, what are these and how have you changed?

In thinking back over my work life I have found I became less able to put a good face on things when I didn't really want to. Earlier in my work I could do this because it helped me to nurture my career and advancement. If I had a bad boss, I could suck it up and live with it. And when I had a good boss, I'd enjoy being able to grow. So I went through that phase of my career where I was able to be whatever I had to be, not just to get ahead but to get the job done. After I got into my 50s, however, I became less and less patient with bad leadership. It was a

good thing I retired when I did at 55 because I don't think I could have continued to put on a good face when it wasn't warranted.

The same thing holds with my experiences in the nonprofit world. I often get to a point of frustration where I just say, "Screw it. The governance is so broken that I'm not going to bat my head against the wall any more." What this means is that I can be extremely effective in the right environment but no longer have any interest in putting on a good face in a lousy environment. I'd rather walk away from it and plant myself somewhere else.

12. What leadership qualities do you most admire in effective leaders that you have known? Which of these qualities do you believe best describe your leadership?

Thinking back on 35 years in the Bell System I had 25 bosses, of whom six were really good. With them there was always a pattern: they were knowledgeable and excellent communicators. They were also engaging and supportive of good people, and they always focused on what we had to accomplish. And they were patient with their people and their organization; they didn't try to jam things left or right, they were just nurturing. The guy who nominated me for two of my positions is turning 97 next month, and his mind is as sharp as ever. This guy was just off the charts, unbelievable, as a leader.

I think I have most of the same qualities, except for patience. But I can have patience under the right circumstances. For example, I headed an important committee at Lake Wildwood this past year. I worked with two extraordinary people, and the three of us were like-minded so we accomplished a lot. We engaged almost 100 other people through focus groups and affinity groups. That was a really fun learning experience for me, and it brought out all of my talents. Where it got frustrating was in trying to get the Wildwood Board to understand and act on what we found and recommended. All we had worked for pretty much ended there, at this last step. So once again the fun left when governance failed to deliver. Maddening. Just maddening.

13. What, if any, spiritual traditions or practices do you most draw upon in exercising leadership?

None that I know of. I never thought of my leadership in that way. I can't think of anything spiritual that guided me during my career, except respect for other human beings. While I grew-up a Christian, I really became spiritual only in the last five years. I was always kind of on the fringes but never really engaged. Now I am engaged and am internalizing what is going on spiritually. I like it. It gives me peace. I ask myself, "Are my thoughts pure, are my words thoughtful, and did I do the right thing?" This is my little triangle test that guides me today. I wish I

had thought this way early in my career, so I could have applied the same test then. Maybe I actually did these things fairly well, because I advanced quite high in AT&T. But I didn't have a whole lot of structure. I just worked my way through this maze for 35 years and it somehow worked. Had I been brought up differently, maybe I would have codified these things much earlier.

14. How has your leadership style changed as you have progressed in life?

Yes it has. When I was coming up in the Bell System during the '60s and '70s top-down leadership was the dominant style. That's the way it was at every level. To get ahead, you just replicated what everyone wanted you to do—and which was the only way I had come to know. Once I turned about 50 and was running a fairly large business unit I had a lot of autonomy and resources. So I began to engage my organization and people much more—for example, 360 surveys and Meyers-Briggs to better understand ourselves and one another. I also became much more respectful of my people and more open as a person. My whole style of leadership really changed in my 50s—dramatically, in fact. I think I may have always inherently been this way, but we certainly weren't rewarded for it. And I have been able to carry this changed leadership style forward to the present. When I work with good people I am at my best. And when I don't I guess I'm not. Unfortunately, most people don't understand how to nurture people and organizations. But when it happens, it is magical.

15. What is the one mistake you see leaders making more frequently than others?

Not engaging people in problem-solving and decision-making. Not making people feel valued. And also not communicating well, which leads to organizational paranoia. The worst boss I ever had spent all of his time ripping everyone. I came to conclude that despite his being smart as a whip, this was a defense mechanism hiding his personal insecurity. He knew everything, but he wouldn't allow his organization to grow. I had another boss who would get to work at 4:00 am and had a reputation for knowing every detail of his organization. Everyone thought he was calling me and my peers at 5:00 am and ripping on us, but I never had that experience with him. He was like the Wizard of Oz, in that he created this impression that he was an ogre. Everyone thought he was ripping us a new one every day, so he must have thought it was important to have this facade.

16. What are you doing to continue growing and developing as a leader?

I am not doing anything special as far as I know. That is, I am not trying to develop myself further because I am on kind of a downward path. But I still enjoy reading a lot and reflecting on what I read and applying it where and when

I can. In the old days when I was running things I could learn and apply immediately, for example Meyers-Briggs. Now I don't have any laboratory except myself. I just seem to be an evolving creature. I am still evolving and probably will be until the day I die.

It is true that I continue to reflect on the nature of my organizational involvements, but applying this is a problem and there is a reason. Unless I am asked and willing to chair something and be in a position to move the agenda ahead, it doesn't work for me these days. It doesn't have a thing to do with me desiring the public presence of being in the chair. It has to do with being able to systematically move the board and organization ahead. If I am not in this role, I am unable to influence direction and increasingly find I am unwilling to put in the energy needed for this kind of thing any more. It's simply not worth it.... Maybe part of saging is knowing when to provide counsel and then disengage.

17. The two characteristics most often associated with sage leader wisdom are *unusual experience* and *the exercise of sound judgment*. What does having wisdom mean to you?

It is learning from a wide range of personal experiences and learning from others. I have to experience and apply things in order to learn. I am constantly learning from others, which is how I continue to develop. This is my natural tendency, to learn from others, from what they have gone through—for example, my 97 year-old friend and former colleague who taught me when I was just a pup. I don't know if this is wisdom, *per se*, but it is a body of knowledge that can be culturally applied in a useful way.

18. What are the one or two peak experiences in your life that set you on the path you're on today?

I don't have a clue. I can't point to one or two big moments that somehow changed my direction, but for me it's all been cumulative, just building and building and still building. I am a learning animal. I drive people nuts on boards by asking a lot of questions. That's just the way I am, how I contribute.

I have had a lot of "ah-ha" moments, however—like the Meyers-Briggs and applying it to people who worked for and with me. This was fascinating and well into my career, and it led to personal insights about my need and desire to change my leadership role and style.

As I think back I often wonder why I sought a BS in Electrical Engineering. There was absolutely nothing in my past that should have led me there. I wasn't particularly good at anything except sports and dating. And there was nothing on my IQ chart that said I would have excelled. Yet, I have always tended to take on

the hardest thing, and electrical engineering struck me as the hardest thing to do in college so I picked it. I can still see myself back then. I had gotten married in my Junior year and was 20. I remember sitting at my desk and going through the catalog and decided I was going to graduate with honors so I could get a master's degree. At the time I had like a 2.5 grade average, and all of the hardest courses were coming up. I marked the grade I wanted to achieve after every course I had to take for the next two years to graduate with honors—and I nailed every one of them. I went from being a 2.5 student to a 3.6 student overnight just because I decided that was what I was going to do. It wasn't such an "ah-ha" experience *per se*, but its long-term impact on me was profound because it was personally affirming. The administration called me in and couldn't believe what had happened. Actually they brought a shrink into the college in my senior year because they wanted to know where *they* had failed. I had been admitted on probation, and then four years later I graduated near the top of my engineering class. They really believed that they had failed somewhere. Incredible!

All of what happened in college was strange to me, but after that I knew I could accomplish anything I set my mind to. When I joined Bell Labs and later went to graduate school with some of the best minds in the country, I found I could compete well with anyone.

19. You probably know other individuals who have sage leadership talents and skills but are not currently involved in the civic life of our community. Why do you believe they choose to be uninvolved? What, if anything, might be done to get them engaged?

Some are just self-centered and never take their heads out of the foxhole unless it involves self-interest. Others don't know how to get involved, and when I find this I try to enable them. Still others have a lack of confidence; they simply don't think they can do what is required.

What to do about this challenge is a different issue, and I really don't have answers. We have a lot of people engaged in our community, a huge number. But of those, many who are engaged don't want or aren't able to lead. One of the reasons is that many in our community and nation don't understand governance and are not engaged in it. Most forprofit and nonprofit boards also struggle with this problem.

We simply have to find ways to help people understand what being part of a team is about and how to become an effective team member. Maybe if people could learn to do this they will come out of their foxholes. And this, in part, is why I believe the Center for Nonprofit Leadership (CNL) should offer an annual workshop on the basics of what being on a governing board involves. Maybe that is a place to make a difference.

- 20. One final question: It is often said that the quality of life in our community is highly attractive and unusual. Do you believe this to be true? (If yes): What are the three or four things about our community that you most value and make you want to continue living here?**

Four things. One is that we have an active life-style here. We also have a rural setting. And we have a very giving citizenry in terms of time, talent, and treasure. We also have an eclectic, diverse group of folks here with an enormous range of backgrounds, talents and tastes. And underneath all of this is meth, broken families, obesity—all kinds of sad things below the radar. This also is part of our community.

- 21. Is there anything else you'd like to add or ask before we close?**

No. Thanks for this opportunity.

Many thanks for your time and insights. This has been a great interview!