

Senior Sage Leaders Reflecting on Their Own Leadership

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I learned through my experiences in the corporate world that the people I admired and respected most were those who knew their values and lived them. Senior Sage Leader

The strengths that most senior sages attribute to themselves are a combination of Jim Collins' Level 4 and Level 5 Leadership and Robert Greenleaf's Servant Leadership. These include a focus on vision, action, and skills aimed at empowering others and fostering their personal, professional, and spiritual growth. A few senior sages point to their leadership styles as strengths, but they tend to say less than emerging sages about their passions and personas—suggesting the possibility that with aging comes an internalization of these qualities rather than an awareness of them at the conscious level.

Senior Leadership Strengths

Vision. Some senior sages see themselves as transformational leaders who are able to inspire others with a vision:

I like people and like to help them. And I am willing to persevere and work hard.

I think I have the ability to look at things from the 10,000 foot level, as well as from differing perspectives.

I've been very visionary at several points in my life. I feel I started the yuppie SUV craze, and my wine bar being the first in New York City is another example. I've always enjoyed being on the cutting edge. The Center for the Arts is that for me. I am tenacious.

My staff used to say I was a visionary. Developing patience and listening skills, building relationships, and being a visionary seem to be my main leadership strengths.

At best I have been an average transactional leader. That is, I did ok in managing the organizations that I led. But as I look back I believe my greatest strength was in serving as a transformational leader. Initiating, inventing, and creating changes are my main strengths.

Action orientation. With a life-time of experience behind them, most senior sages consider their leadership strength is exhibited when they initiate action that leads to significant achievement. This involves a collection of extraordinary qualities: energy, enthusiasm, deep knowledge, realistic goals, organizational skills, problem-solving ability, effective planning, risk-taking, the ability to muster resources, and great execution and follow-through:

My strengths are definitely in action and based in my business background. I love problems and love solving them. If someone says, "That can't be done," I generally think, "Yes it can." I can be very focused and am very tenacious. It's an extension of what I learned in running companies, in doing business. You identify a problem, develop a plan on to how to address it, and then implement.

I'm able to get people together around projects, to inspire or talk to them and gather them. Another strength is that I take action rather than just talking about something. When I decide I want to work on an idea, I just start and follow through. Sometimes I bite off more than I can chew, and then I have to let something go. But for the most part, if I'm focused on a project I'm very good at following through and getting it done.

Long experience has equipped me to understand how to organize people to accomplish goals. My managing philosophy is, "There is nothing you can't achieve if you don't care who gets the credit." That's not original with me, but it is my key managing philosophy. I motivate people by personally pitching in to do any job.

I am a good and thorough planner. My approach is to think things through and focus on results. I am also good at getting people to engage in things they might not want to do. I accomplish this by stressing our mission and purpose. I also tend to identify the results or outcomes from a meeting well before it takes place.

Politics don't enter into anything with me. I think my strengths are based in organizational style, personal relationships, and being able to take a group of people and manage the process. And being able to set direction and take initiative, solve problems, and mitigate issues.

People skills. To have a successful action orientation requires that senior sages possess a substantial tool kit of skills in working with others. This includes such qualities as being open and approachable, being able to build relationships, making judgments about how to draw-out potential in others, active listening, teamwork, willingness to give credit where it is due, dealing well with ambiguity, and possessing discipline and patience:

The strengths and capabilities that worked well for me in business were different than those in my community service and nonprofit work now. In the business world I was very action-oriented. I drove people and held them accountable for getting results. Those who didn't succeed and go up the ladder were destined to a flat career. The principal attribute that has worked well for me in the nonprofit world is learning to be a good listener. I try to find out people's strengths and then tap into them. And I'm probably much more diplomatic than I was in my corporate days. Another skill I have acquired is communicating well with groups of people and being succinct in dealing with problems without necessarily promoting my part of the agenda. The most important thing I have learned is patience, although I am still more prone to action than not.

I have a perspective on change and reform where there is a combination of problems and a willingness to act on them. I have a strong sense of social organization and networking. When moved, I am willing to take on big projects and gather people to work on them until they are completed. I have learned the value of risk-taking.

I have the ability to be a quick study of people and decide whether to connect with them or not. I can immediately determine whether I'd like to get to know the person, or if the person possesses something important that I'd like to learn. I guess this came from all of the hiring I did in one of my early jobs. I got to be very good at assessing people's strengths and weaknesses and at making "yes" or "no" decisions on whether to hire. Building personal relationships is most important to me and probably best defines my leadership style.

My leadership is based in my organizational and personal relationships, and I've always been able to think things through. I've also grown in my willingness and comfort level to seek advice from others about how to approach something, and being open to ideas and suggestions. That doesn't necessarily mean that I will act on the advice of others, but I am committed to seek and listen to it. I've seen a lot of people who don't do this, and they can be ineffective. It's important for others to feel they have been listened to objectively and not shut-out.

I have become a good listener and have always had thoughts and opinions about things and good insights. I generally manage to stay apolitical, and that is important to me. When I come across those who have a different perspective, I don't try to dissuade them. Rather, I keep the focus on what we are both interested in. I like being part of a team and have never shied away from being the team leader.

I'm blessed with self-confidence and if I have something to say I don't worry about what people are going to think. I have the ability to take a complex issue and simplify, find the essence of a problem. And I deal with ambiguity very well. Also, I am not particularly judgmental. I believe most people are basically good, so I don't engage in discussions about how bad people are. I believe I have an ample amount of organizational sense, of what works and what doesn't. Thanks to good schools and teachers, my English language skills are pretty good. I'm also very open and try to be approachable. People don't see me playing games or having hidden agendas.

Personal leadership style. While most senior sages generally don't talk much about their personal style, some are willing to share:

The greatest strength is my personal style of building relationships and connecting with family, friends, and the community. My life here has been full because I know I have had a major impact on this community in the areas of elder care and health of the aging. I can see the results of my work, so I believe I am a respected part of the community. This is almost mystical and has to do with seeing people as brothers and sisters on a journey. A person's way of life is their politics, religion, and a way of being. My beliefs are based in my actions, and how I portray myself in my life's work.

During most of my active career I believed that if something was worth doing and doing Well, I had to do it. Not anymore. Letting go and letting others took me decades to learn, and I am now able to do this easily. Part of the turn-around had to do with the fact that I am introverted by nature. I enjoy quiet and being alone or with a few close friends more than almost anything else. Whatever extroversion I exhibited during my career was all learned behavior, and while I can still do it reasonably well it does not come from the heart. It is inauthentic. In most instances you don't become a good leader if you have these traits.

For over 40 years I was a manager of the organizations in which I had been part. My style has been to mentor and lead through collaboration. My approach is to identify the things that need to be done in a given project and then figure out how best to assemble them to achieve success. This, by the way, is how architects go about their work.

I live quietly and when I act, I act quietly. I like being in the background, working behind the scenes, rather than being up front. I am not a joiner and don't belong to a lot of organizations. So I do things without other people knowing. People don't have to know the good things one does. The Good Lord knows, and that's all that is important.

High Energy and Experience-Rich

The senior sage leaders see themselves as high energy and experience-rich leaders. In Jim Collins terms, they are often Type 5 leaders who combine persistence with humility. They know how to sustain efforts toward a specific goal, get the job done, and coordinate efforts to increase efficiency and effectiveness. They learned years ago how to delegate and mentor, so they know how to bring out the strengths and skills in other people with whom they work. Emulating Collins' leadership trait of modesty, these senior sages can step aside when recognition is being assigned for a successful project: "I don't need to take credit any more for the work being done." The corollary is, "You can lead from the back of the bus as well as from the front." These sages don't need to have the official title of "leader" in order to be influential and respected by their colleagues.

In many instances, the past experiences and perspectives of senior sages have had to be adjusted when working within nonprofit organizations. Many senior sages formerly worked in very large corporations, and they find that their favored nonprofit organizations are much smaller and certainly more resource poor. This means they have to roll-up their sleeves and dig into the work of the organization. Senior sages also receive much quicker feedback on their performance, and virtually everyone is a volunteer who has a gift to contribute. Command and control no longer are appropriate values. So while past experience is valuable, personal values are of even greater importance.