

## **Encouraging Senior Sage Leadership**

**Gary Quehl and William Bergquist**

*I do think there is a very solid group here who could be energized to participate. And we're going to need them to mentor the young, replace older leaders, and help government get more adept.* Senior Sage Leader

Senior sage leaders observe that quick, artificial fixes won't work. Their reality is that engaging more senior civically must involve a one-on-one approach:

*Some have not yet had the good fortune of discovering the connection between an individual volunteer organization and their own passion. I think we can only turn this around one person at a time.*

*We have been able to significantly increase our volunteer pool at The Center for the Arts over the past year. One person I know wasn't very involved before. We had just met, and he somehow got turned on by my passion for the Center. Part of this is being at the right place and time and being ready for something to "click" inside, but I don't know how you set that up consciously.*

*We get focused on what we're doing, what our organization needs, and tend to forget to reach out to others and ask, "Would you like to help on this?" I feel I'm beginning to do this more than I used to, because having lived here going on 14 years I feel like a veteran. I tell myself, "C'mon, talk to people more, invite them!"*

*Involvement in community service has to be “one by each.” Someone has to understand a person’s situation well enough to invite them into something they would be willing to say yes to. When a person gets a sense of personal satisfaction, they begin to offset the costs of time, energy and commitment. So inviting others into community involvement has to be on an individual basis, not en masse. And we need to do this so our leaders are replenished as the aging process moves some people to less activity. A form of succession planning needs to continue to take place.*

*How do we get them involved? I believe we have to find something that hits their value system and matches their passion, so they realize they possess things they can contribute and that are really needed here.*

Senior sages suggest additional strategies for increasing the civic involvement of those who possess sage qualities: engaging and asking, making the public case for civic engagement, establishing relationships with newcomers, tying projects to specific volunteers, and communicating the physical and mental benefits of civic engagement:

*It’s such a personal thing. I think there are a host of reasons why someone would choose not to be engaged. If there were someone I wanted to involve, I would have to approach them individually, personally, to understand why they aren’t already involved. If it’s something that can be addressed, then I’d do so and see where it leads. I can’t generalize, but it certainly does involve asking people and creating a feeling of inclusion and welcome.*

*The challenge is to get people to help on a consistent, day-to-day basis. I think it never hurts to ask people to get involved, for there is no harm in asking. Some will say no, but you can ask them again after a period of time. Eventually they might say yes. I don’t know that there is any formula for getting people involved, other than helping them understand that they can make a difference, they can make a contribution, their life can matter even when it is volunteering on a one-time basis.*

*I think people, especially retired people, come here and are burned out. Also some people here want to put others into boxes, and that's usually not a good idea. The way through is to establish good relationships with newcomers and those who have gotten over the burnout syndrome. In the final analysis, relationship-building is the key to getting individuals involved in helping our community to grow and prosper.*

*To get younger, employed people involved, you have to find their interests. They might just be willing to work on some project. Then you have to learn what young people are good at or might be good at. It is difficult when young people are employed because so many organizations meet during the day. If I were to do something about it, I'd ask the guys I associate with and know, "Who in the community should we be talking to about volunteering?" And then go and talk with them.*

*There's a lot of research that proves mental and physical health is maintained better when people stay active. I think volunteering and exercising your mind and body as opposed to being a couch potato goes a long way toward longevity. Yet some people on their own volition shut-down and never engage. At first I was perplexed about them but now conclude that it doesn't make much sense to spend a lot of time or effort trying to recruit them for community work.*

The agenda suggested by senior sage leaders to advance the quality and level of civic engagement is daunting but doable. Difficult economic times may well provide the best opportunity for people to pull together and generate the enthusiasm and energy needed to implement many of these ideas.

## **The Uses of Positive Psychology**

Perhaps all it takes is someone thanking newly-engaged volunteers for the work they are doing. Recent research in the field of organizational psychology shows that expressed appreciation can be an exceptional motivator. These findings resulted from a recent shift in perspective called "positive psychology." We now know that if we catch people when they are doing things right, rather than criticizing them for doing things wrong, we are likely to create conditions for

increased motivation and sustained activity. So we might ask, “Is it possible that these new volunteers have not been fully appreciated for their initial services?” “Is this why their involvement is often short-lived and why they view their service as a sacrifice rather than as a source of personal benefits?”

A fully engaged senior sage might come up to the person who is pouring drinks at a Center for the Arts function and say, “We really appreciate your helping out in this way. Are you enjoying this? What do you like about it? Might you be interested in learning about other ways in which you can become involved in our organization?” The individual is encouraged to discern what is gratifying in their small civic act. This can be a “teachable moment” or a moment for “crucial reflection” on the shifting motivational base of the potential sage leader. As we have already noted several times, the key is to find moments that are slightly challenging and that are fun and engrossing—what Csikszentmihalyi and the other positive psychologists call moments of “flow,” the threshold between boredom and anxiety, the balance between challenge and support.

## **Being Invited**

One senior sage offered a wonderful example of extending an invitation. He was at a social event and met a couple who had recently moved to Twin Towns. The husband had been retired for a year, and during the course of the evening the senior sage discovered the retiree was looking for something to do. The interviewer said to the couple, “A Habitat for Humanity home is being dedicated next Sunday. Can my wife and I pick you up and take you to this event?” Our senior sage leader knew what was going to happen. At a Habitat home dedication, even with the hardened construction crew, there is not a dry eye when the family is handed the keys to their new home. On the way to the dedication, the senior sage and his wife talked about civic engagement in Grass Valley and Nevada City. On the ride back, he “closed the deal” with the new retiree and his wife.

This successful invitation to civic engagement included several steps. It began with the retiree and his wife being exposed to a success story; they witnessed a celebration of achievement and fulfillment—and that is critical. Then, the senior sage continued to build the relationship by tapping into this person’s spirit and passion; the retiree was responded not just to the opportunity

but also to the friendship that was being established. And he had been shown a way in which he could gain access to the community via civic engagement. All it took was a heart-felt invitation.

In many instances senior members of the community moved to Grass Valley or Nevada City not because they knew someone living here, but because they were attracted to the life style and beauty of the natural environment. Consequently, they often arrive without an established social network and initially assume the community is closed, or that they are unwilling to take a proactive approach to get to know the community. They wonder, “If I ask to be invited to that party, will they say no and cause us to be embarrassed? Worse, will they say ‘yes’ but not really mean it and we will be unwelcomed guests?” To some extent, these assumptions about in-group behavior are accurate. There does tend to be many of the same people showing up for every event, running for nonprofit boards, and volunteering for each public service assignment. It’s not easy to break into such a tightly-knit civic engagement community.

### **Enclaves and Reasons for Civic Engagement**

Many senior sage leaders say they don’t know anyone who isn’t actively involved in the community. They are members of what we have already identified as an “enclave community”—one in which virtually everyone shares the same values and life interests (Endnote 98). In this respect, the engagement community doesn’t really differ from the gated communities in Twin Towns. Both communities tend to be self-enclosed with self-reinforcing social network patterns. A fundamental question thus becomes: Can you build a bridge between these communities—and what happens after the bridge is built? Is there much to talk about or do together?

It is understandable that newcomers are waiting to be invited in, and they especially want to know why they are being invited. One senior sage observes that he initially felt he was being invited into a nonprofit organization for nothing more than a financial contribution. He asked, “Are they valuing my potential friendship and collegueship or just my checkbook? Why do they want me to join, and does their reason for inviting me align with the skills and knowledge I can bring to this organization?” If the person making the invitation has an ulterior motive, then the invitation feels like rejection. Or the person being invited recognizes that he or she is not being valued for the right reasons and leaves with bitter feelings and resentment. If the person doing

the inviting truly cares about the well-being of the person being invited in, then the invitation is likely to be accepted and the engagement of the new person probably will expand and endure over time.

## **Invitation to Involvement**

The invitation often involves something more than just a proposal to participate in civic service. Sometimes newly-arrived invitees are waiting to be informed about what in the community is of real quality, such as recreation, entertainment, good stores, and restaurants. They appreciate someone suggesting that they attend a play or go to a musical event together, so the first invitation doesn't have to be a community service project. This allows invitees to experience opportunities that are available in the community—and which more often than not are greater than they had anticipated. If they get turned on by the event, then it is possible to take a next step by introducing them to people who planned or put on the event. This may be all the connection that newcomers need to begin their civic engagement. The key is to facilitate the experience for potential senior sage leaders. It is to demonstrate how civic engagement might provide them with meaning and enjoyment. This requires that the person who is being cultivated for civic involvement truly needs to be understood: interests and passions, what feeds the spirit and soul. And then they have to be invited to join in. They just have to be asked!

There is another way in which the issue of non-involvement can be addressed, and that is through community education. There is need to recognize that everyone in the Twin Towns community is somehow involved in its current and future life. The decisions they make about store purchases, the route they take in driving to their doctor's appointment, the weekly golf games in which they chose to participate—all of these contribute to the dynamics and patterns of community life. In this respect, there is no one who is *not* "involved." Everyone directly or indirectly benefits from and contributes to their community. If this connection can be made clear through a formal community education program, then more members of the community are likely to make civic contributions—regardless of health status, income level, or life-style preferences. They will be inclined to step forward because they become more fully aware that they are already part of the fabric of their community.