

Senior Sage Leaders: Changes in Their Leadership Style

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Over the years my key learning as a leader is this: we aren't put on this planet to be alone.

Senior Sage Leader

What about the senior sage leaders? With more years and a greater diversity of experience, do they see even greater change in their leadership patterns and styles than the emerging sage leaders?

Changes in Pattern

Unlike emerging sages, some senior sage leaders report they have not experienced significant changes in their leadership style over the years. They say their leadership behaviors are essentially the same as in earlier years.

I think I have remained the same person I have always been, but I have become more comfortable with who I am and more confident in myself. At this point in life I know what my skills and weaknesses are, and because of this I am more confident of what I can accomplish. I also have learned to set aside more time for my wife and family.

The thing that matters is what experience does for you. There is hardly any experience that I could get into at this point in time that I haven't had before — although my stomach churning is probably a lot less than it was when I first went through it.

I'm pretty much the same guy I was at 30 or 40, although I'm better looking now and comb my hair differently. I try to set a good example. I may curse under my breath, but I try to think about what I'm going to say before I say it. Apart from inspiring my players when I was coaching, I don't think I have ever intentionally tried to offend anyone.

However, the majority of senior sages describe significant behavioral changes in key areas: working hard to be patient, becoming more diplomatic and less aggressive, and recognizing the value that others can bring to situations:

Becoming more patient: One of the changes that aging has brought is the shift from less to more patience:

I think I've become more patient. When our county superintendent of schools asked me to work with the Three R School years ago, I told him I wasn't sure I had the patience to do that. He said, "I think you do." So he talked me into it and I was fine.

I have a lot more patience now for stupidity. In many cases, it was a person's naiveté. Early on, that would irritate me no end. I'd have a hard time being patient with people who didn't get it, or didn't want to get it. I've come to accept that sometimes it's just like that.

I have become more patient. I am certainly less direct and not as aggressive as I was in business. I have learned of the need to "go light" in working with volunteers. And I now tend to ease people into their roles when making changes.

Becoming more diplomatic and less aggressive. A companion to patience is the quality of becoming less confrontational and more diplomatic:

There's a pattern that I have observed in myself that I'm trying to change. Instead of being a "kickass person," no matter what place or role that I play on a board or within an organization, I'd like to transform into becoming an inspiring leader.

I no longer have the temper I use to have. I now feel I can mostly stay on an even keel. I still rant every once in a while, but not with strong emotions and out of control conduct which affects people. Now I pick my battles. There are times when you want to raise your

voice, and there are times when you don't need to. So I am more even-keeled, more calm, more centered, more focused. This comes with either hormonal change or old age, and I am not sure which.

One pattern always comes to the forefront, and that has to do with the way I deal with anger. I had a short fuse in business. Interesting enough, a short fuse and intimidation worked when you were in negotiations, whether it was with union leaders or in confrontations with colleagues. I learned that being tough in that world led to success. Well it doesn't work in most other relationships, so the biggest thing I have learned over time is the need for patience. I have learned a lot about being patient with youth and younger people, and coaching rather than beating on them all the time.

Recognizing the value of other persons. Because so many senior sages were highly driven during their younger years, they didn't always appreciate the value that other people could bring to the table. Now they do:

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. I also became much more respectful of them and more open as a person. My whole style of leadership really changed in my 50s—dramatically, in fact. I may have always inherently been this way, but I certainly wasn'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.

Early in my career I used to take things personally. If people didn't like my idea or suggestion, it must mean I wasn't smart or creative enough. I soon learned that sharing ideas is what was important and not who presented them. I also learned that I needed to set boundaries for myself or I would never leave work! I used to feel responsible for

getting everything done on time and at a high standard. I didn't want to disappoint my supervisors or need to ask staff to do even more work when they were already swamped. This was a painful process for me but I learned to delegate and prioritize tasks, submit work that was acceptable but not stellar, and negotiate new deadlines for some projects.

I started my career as a coach, and I made all of the decisions and directed everything. Gradually my leadership style changed to mentoring, probably because I had such wonderful mentors myself. I can do the motivational stuff, but my pleasure and satisfaction is in helping people to grow.

Senior sage leaders also identify other behavioral changes that have taken place in their leadership over the years. These include no longer needing to take credit for work accomplished, no longer having to be attached to specific outcomes, being more reflective, learning how to compromise better, being more flexible and graceful when dealing with others, and no longer doing things because of the “should” factor:

In my early professional years I had to be the one who was leading. Over time, I learned that I could step back and encourage and mentor others to take on leadership roles. Also, I no longer needed to take credit for work accomplished. Meeting common project goals are now the most important thing to me.

I used to care about controlling the outcome of things, and now I am not so attached. In fact, I find that in working with other people it's not possible or desirable to control outcomes. For me, the important thing is to engage in a collaborative process to achieve goals. Attachment to outcomes is a childhood thing.

I'm less aggressive than I used to be and more reflective. I also don't get around as much as I used to. The opportunities are still there, but age takes its toll.

I have learned that not everyone is going to see things the way I see them. And that compromise is infinitely better than war. So, age brings wisdom if you're open to it.

Sometimes I find I'm a little more assertive than I want to be. I realize that this is not hard-hitting corporate America. When working within volunteer organizations, where people are not paid to perform and meet goals, we all need to be grateful for any time or effort that is freely given. Everyone has unique gifts, and it is important to hear everyone's ideas—holding in mind the organization's objectives and mission.

I have learned to discipline myself to have a certain detachment, and this has enabled me to remain with these organizations longer. I didn't used to be this way. You can become so jaded that you just walk away. If you are a little more detached and listen more carefully, you can weed through things better.

In my early life I used to do things because I thought I should. I was dominated by "should's" and the implicit fear that my personal worth was tied to doing them. No more. Now I do only what I want to do, and this is very liberating. I also used to think that I had to do everything by myself. Now I gladly ask for help and receive it, and this is also very liberating. The key learning is that we aren't put on the planet to be alone.

Changes in Leadership Style

Changes in senior sage leadership styles over the years have principally occurred in six areas. One involves the movement from top-down leadership to involving and respecting other people and placing confidence in them. The second concerns a shift in leadership style from being more to becoming less driven, calmer, and more centered. A third change is the discovery that collaboration is more important than the individual leader attempting to make things happen alone. And there are other changes as well: greater tolerance in accepting outcomes if they don't measure-up to original expectations, learning that effective leadership requires accountability and a great deal of patience, no longer needing to have a title to be a leader, and finding that personal influence is more important than positional power.

From top-down to involving others. Many of the senior leaders have occupied high level, authoritative positions that enabled them to call the shots. Whether due to the aging process or

the result of learning the hard way from experience, senior sages report their shift to a leadership style that involves others:

I am less dictatorial and more of a consensus builder now. And I am more flexible. I had some very good mentors early on in my career. One of the reasons I moved up the corporation very fast was I had no intention of making a career of it. So I didn't let anything stop me from accomplishing what I wanted. It was a hidebound company with lots of rules, so if you broke a rule and failed you were toast. But if you broke a rule and succeeded, you could take the next steps until you get promoted. So I got to try a lot of things, and people there gave me lots of latitude.

A calmer, more centered, less driven leadership style. Having shifted from a top-down leadership style to learning the value of involving others, most senior sages are now more relaxed and centered in their personal relations:

I think I have transformed from an A+ to a B+ personality. I am less driven and more relaxed in my style. I have become less of a perfectionist, though I still need to learn to relax more.

If there has been any change in my leadership style it is that I am a bit more laid back, patient, and more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers. And I'm certainly not ambitious any more, except for our grandchildren.

I now have more fun being a leader—as opposed to when I was paid and had to match someone else's expectations. I am now part of a group that develops its own expectations, and this has allowed me to be freer.

The importance of collaboration. The freeing-up of senior sages from former behaviors and practices has also enabled them to engage others in teamwork and collaboration:

More and more it's about working together. I've never felt myself to be one to tell others what to do. More and more it's about what we can achieve together. I'd rather be called a mentor or facilitator than a leader.

I have developed a much more collaborative style of leadership, and I am able to tolerate diverse opinions. I can be completely comfortable allowing different points of view to be expressed and debated. In my corporate leadership role I would push for rapid decisions and was much more impatient.

I am much less directive. I used to think I had to make things happen, but I don't believe this anymore. In order for things to happen, there needs to be collaboration. There needs to be willingness on the part of others to see the benefit of helping. Praising people for jobs well done is very important, too.

Greater patience and accountability. Now calmer, more centered, and less driven, most senior sages say their patience has grown and they have greater sensitivity to their own accountability:

I am more patient, and I believe I have become more accountable. I think I've always been a pretty good communicator, but perhaps not always as accountable as I now am. I'm also better at staying on focus.

Three things: I think I have become more patient. I have developed a sense of humility and learned not to expect change right away. And I have become able to surrender, even when I want my own way.

Being more direct and more patient seems to work in bringing people along. I hope it's not bullying, but when people see the facts they often fold their cards pretty quickly. Nonprofits, especially, can get glacial about decision-making. I see that malaise in a lot of them.

Leadership without title. Senior sages report becoming freed-up when they came to realize that the effectiveness of leadership has more to do with the ability to influence others than to call on the authority of a formal position and title:

I always thought you had to have a title when I was younger, and you had to be the best at something in order to be a leader. But no longer. This is where I've chosen to be, even though I know the hierarchical world still exists out there.

I no longer have to be the leader or get credit for success. Now it's more important to me that others do those things and that we all are able to successfully complete common goals.

What is most satisfying to me these days is sitting in meetings of the organization I helped found eight years ago, listening to others talk about the organization, and reflecting on our accomplishments to date. And musing about all of the wonderful new things that are on the drawing board. I take enormous personal satisfaction in this now as a back bencher.

Other changes in leadership styles. To a lesser degree, senior sages report leadership style changes in other areas as well. This includes moving away from aggressive action, better listening skills, growth in self-evaluation and self-awareness, being more attuned to intuition, and having greater self-confidence:

I've moved away from being aggressive and am more inclined to reflection and forecasting in wanting to understand the future. I've become more solicitous of others and tend to listen to all sides of an issue. I try to lead by example, yet I have less tolerance for things that go wrong.

I think I have become a better listener. As I listen to my kids and their friends, I can tell them what they should do or I can just shut up and listen longer. I have learned when to do either one. Sometimes people just want you to be judge and jury and tell them what

you want them to do. Other times they just want to sound off, vent and let things drift until you say “You need to do this.”

I’ve gained a lot of confidence in my abilities and seeing what my strengths and weaknesses are. And in the process I have experienced growth in self-evaluation and self-awareness. I have achieved this through my dreaming practices, travel, and being called on to do things.

Well I have become a better judge of people, and I am learning to trust my intuition. Often times I’ll intuit which way to go, and then I’ll think about it and go in a different direction concluding, “I should not have done that. Why don’t I remember that?” I am calmer and more centered now.

In a nutshell, the greatest change in my leadership style has been the shift from being fearful and lacking dynamism to being able to get myself out in the world with knowledge and confidence. When we used to lead groups in our home I was terrified because I thought they knew more than I did, when in reality they didn’t. And even if they did, well, that’s part of the learning process.

What I Have Started Doing

Many senior men and women talk about the falling away of their ego and about giving-up a confrontational leadership style that often diminished other people: “I gave-up my old persona, which had allowed me to gain attention, be sarcastic, and be adversarial. I don’t see how this persona would be of any value to me today.” Senior sages are still concerned about how to make something work, but they have reduced their intensity in forcing it to happen. These senior leaders now focus much more on process and on including others in it. They ask, “What will motivate other people?” rather than asking, “Why don’t they do what I have told them to do?”

Even more fundamental, most senior sages are now insightful about the cherished assumptions and practices they once had as organizational leaders. In the words of Don Schön, they have become reflective practitioners and have begun to engage in something called “second-order

learning." This has to do with learning about their assumptive base and abandoning or gradually reducing their use of old strategies, because senior sages want to learn something new. They have grown tired of their old selves and have become a bit bored with their previous leadership style. They find that their new civic work and new leadership challenges provide an opportunity to cast off old assumptions and leadership practices: "I want to try something new and see how it works."

Now in the latter stages of their lives, senior leaders have reduced their fear of change. They had already experienced failure in their lives and learned they could survive it. So rather than retreating from the world—a sign of psychological stagnation—they choose to remain active in it and experiment with different ways of being. Says one, "If I don't try something new in my life now, when *will* I take the risk?" It takes inner strength and self-confidence to turn away from fear about change and step into the abyss at this time in life, which makes these senior sages truly exceptional men and women. In short, it is their capacity and willingness to be reflective about their assumptions and past strategies—and their eagerness to try something new—that is at the heart of what it means to be a senior sage leader.

A key term frequently heard from senior sages is "patience." In thinking back on what they have gained from personal changes, these experienced men and women talk about relaxing some of their expectations. They still want great things to happen and are just as committed to important causes as they were before. But now they are ready to be steadfast—and patient. Much like Jim Collins' Type 5 leaders, these senior sages are stubborn and persistent, but they are also willing to let time pass and make certain that everyone is "on board" before taking the first big step on anything. As one says, "I have stopped telling people what to do and have started listening to what they need *me* to do." The art and skill of listening to other people perhaps has been the hardest change for many senior sage leaders to achieve.

Even more broadly, senior sages have shifted away from internal focus to greater emphasis on things external. They look to other people for ideas and answers rather than always taking on the burden themselves. Says one, "I have learned to let go and let others." And in the process, a number of senior sages have become effective mentors and facilitators. They are able to create

dialogue and encourage diverse opinions and solutions rather than always offering their own. The shift to external orientation seems to have resulted from growing self-confidence and the eagerness of senior sages to share credit with other people. As one senior sage artfully put it, “Even though I have the right answer all the time, I don’t always have to express it!” Other seniors describe the character of this shift as not being glued to certain results: “If you are not attached to a specific outcome, so many wonderful things can happen.”

Same Old Me But Also the New Me

A common theme among many senior sages is that they continue to have the same leadership skill-set but now use it in a new way. Yes, they still have the same personality but have smoothed off rough edges in ways that facilitate working effectively with other people in the nonprofit setting. Like most people, senior sage leaders didn’t change overnight. But they have modified the way in which they now think, feel, and act to get more accomplished with and through other people. And they talk about gradual change over time rather than dramatic transformation. They also muse about reverting to their old leadership style when under stress: it is such a powerful pull because they received ample rewards in using it in their earlier lives. So the old style becomes the default position and senior sages say they often struggle to stay with the “new self.”

Senior sages have the additional challenge of remaining strongly committed to a cause while being open to new ideas and perspectives—what one senior calls “gentle fierceness.” It is the joining of two things that are often in opposition: the passion for something (fierceness) tied to the willingness to engage in dialogue and collaboration on behalf of it (gentleness). This may well be at the heart of a new model for senior leadership.