

Deep Caring XXVIII: Generativity Four—The Benefits of Civic Engagement

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The generative motivations that Sage leaders attribute to their civic involvements, and the benefits they receive from them, are closely linked. But benefits possess a different quality than motivations. Emerging and Senior Sage leaders all identify with the rich source of human talent and energy that exists in the community. Like the founders of Grass Valley and Nevada City, they see gold in the foothills—but the gold is human capital rather than a mineral.

Emerging Sage Leaders

Emerging Sage leaders identify seven major benefits that they receive from their civic involvements.

Personal Satisfaction and Fulfillment

The leading benefit appears to be personal satisfaction and fulfillment:

The great feeling that comes from giving back, of being involved with our youth and knowing I am impacting their lives, is a tremendous personal benefit. Those students will remain in our community and be our future contributors. Being involved with them also helps to keep me young.

Personal Relationships

Another major benefit to Emerging Sage leaders is the personal relationships they are able to build from their civic engagements: “My wife and I have so much fun in the relationships we have with other people through our civic engagements. We feel inspired to continue to do things. Some of the people I grew-up with here spend much of their free time still playing video games – I just don’t get it.”

Advancing Community Welfare

There is a third benefit, advancing community welfare, that is rated quite high by many Emerging Sages:

The feeling of doing something good and well is inspiring for me. It's the satisfaction that comes from being part of something that makes this community a better place. I get an equal voice at the table and have an understanding of how I can be of service. It makes my job easier as a professional.

Work Life

Other benefits come from the work life of Emerging Sages: "Although there are days of great frustration, I feel fortunate to have the job I have. Being in a position where I feel like I make a difference. And making the community a better place for our families and children."

Legacy

Emerging Sage leaders also value the benefit of *legacy*, leaving something behind that reflects on the lives they have lived: "Having peace of mind in knowing that I am investing my life in something worthy. I am able to go home every night and look in the mirror and know I have spent my day and my life in service to people, working for a cause greater than myself, hoping that it will outlast me."

Enduring Relationships

Emerging Sage leaders also talk a lot about relationships being formed through their civic involvements – deep, meaningful, enduring relationships that involve them with other engaging people. These relationships serve as a powerful antidote to the isolation that new technologies inevitably introduce. For without civic engagement, men and women of the technology age can be easily seduced by the virtual contact they have through the Internet and e-mail rather than seeking contact of substance with "real people." The Emerging Sages spend time with colleagues who share the same values, concerns, and priorities. It's almost a "church of community service" to which they and their collaborators belong. For most Emerging Sages, this certainly beats the attractions of social media.

Lifelong Learners and “Flow”

There is another set of generative benefits identified by many Emerging Sage leaders. These cluster around the theme of continuous life-long learning. Emerging Sages are often involved in new roles and seek learning about new facets of community life; they motivate themselves to grow and learn by taking on new and expanded challenges. Moreover, this new learning is seen as fun, a joy rather than drudgery. Civic activities have become their social life and source of leisure as well. This reaffirms their current values and helps them to grow in new areas—like creative problem-solving, strategizing, and reading about new developments in a variety of fields. So, the personal horizons of Emerging Sages are being enlarged and they, in turn, are serving as role models for their own children and for other mid-life adults in Grass Valley and Nevada City.

Some of the older Emerging Sages describe their civic involvements in terms of “commitment” and “responsibility,” but many at the younger end of the age spectrum talk about the sheer enjoyment of the work they are doing. This is the process of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990): the incredible joy to be found in taking on and learning from a new challenge. While many of the Senior Sage leaders become civically involved in order to find stimulation and meaning in their lives, most Emerging Sages are already highly stimulated: they juggle family, job, recreation, and civic involvement; and they don’t need more incentive. They seek out and find “flow” in their civic activities. One wonders if this pattern of multiple sources of flow will help these men and women to lead longer and healthier lives. Perhaps, as previously noted, engagement in civic activities is beneficial to health at virtually any age.

Senior Sage Leaders

As in the case of the Emerging Sage Leaders, the Senior leaders identify multiple benefits—but they are not all the same as those identified by their younger colleagues.

Personal Fulfillment

Like their Emerging Sage colleagues, Senior Sage leaders believe the most valued benefit is personal fulfillment: “Making these concerts and music available, and the way it’s done, gives

me a feeling of real accomplishment. It also makes me feel that in some way, through the arts, we're making this a better place to live. That is quite fulfilling.”

Building Personal Relationships

Building personal relationships is another perceived benefit that Senior Sages receive from their civic engagements:

First of all, there is a feeling of relevance. I think it is very dangerous for anyone not to feel relevant. I also get a lot of reinforcement from people who are happy with the contributions they believe that I make. And I've gotten to know a lot of good people who I would never have known without my community involvements.

Helping Others

For many Senior Sage leaders, what motivates them, and the benefits they receive from their civic involvements, are one-in-the same—helping others:

Take Habit for Humanity as an example. I work with a group of friends I have made within a Habitat construction crew. We go out and hammer nails and get a lot done while also having a good time. Best of all, we are helping families to have a nice home. What can beat that?

Community Betterment

There is a fourth generative benefit that Senior Sages identify from their civic involvements, and it is community betterment.

I feel I have been able to give back to the community that has given so much to our family. I hope I am bringing value to organizations that are contributing to the overall benefit of the community. When I first came here I saw what people were trying to do, and I'm proud of living in this area. I've always been one to practice what I preach, help out if I can to make the community even better. I volunteer for both little things and big things.

This benefit is directly tied to Stage Three Generativity:

My wife and I have been involved with others in growing the arts, and 32 years ago there wasn't much here. Now the arts are flourishing. Yes, one of our theatres, which I loved,

closed, but we still have three or four other active theatre companies. And we have two premier and very active musical organizations, leaving aside the other music groups here that seem endless. So we have a community that is physically beautiful, somewhat remote, but has a rich cultural life.

Belonging and Relationships

Like their Emerging counterparts, Senior Sage leaders often speak of engaging the community through their volunteer work – the sense of belonging to a great cause that brings them together with kindred spirits. Their commitments and passions are especially exhibited and fulfilled through their favored organizations. They feel worthy and worthwhile because they have something to give, and their talents and experiences are recognized by others. Senior Sages realize with pride that they possess the skills and motivation to make a difference, and to find others with whom they can share their experiences through collaboration. These colleagues possess complimentary skills and also offer opportunities for Senior Sage leaders to build new and enduring friendships.

Giving Back During the Senior Years

Senior Sage leaders often say they benefit greatly from the sense that they are leaving their community in a better place than they found it. Clearly, they feel they are leaving a mark on the community's quality of life. One Senior Sage puts it succinctly: "I'm just proud to live here." But there seems to be much more to appreciate from the benefits derived by Senior Sages when they become generative during their senior years. We note that many Senior Sages say they had become isolated in their early retirement due to being "burned-out" from years of corporate, nonprofit, or government politics. So, it is understandable that some Senior Sages retreat into themselves and became "curmudgeons" at first. Then in time, they discover they are experiencing personal stagnation and look for opportunities to become vital again.

Many previously isolated Senior Sages that we interviewed have found that their civic engagements pulled them back into the world. This ultimately may be the greatest benefit that is derived from civic engagement. Rather than their volunteer work being regarded as a source of tension or sacrifice, these Senior Sages discoverer that civic work can integrate very nicely with

family and recreational interests. The first step out of withdrawal and isolation is often the most difficult, but once engaged in the community these seniors acquired new energy and renewed purpose. And they gain a real sense of balance in their lives. Further, Senior Sages say they feel better after providing community service (physical benefits) and feel intellectually stimulated (mental benefits). And they benefit greatly from the camaraderie of their fellow Sage leaders (interpersonal benefits). Put simply, Senior Sages find that civic work feeds not only their spirit but their entire being.