EMERGING SAGE LEADERS REFLECTING ON THEIR OWN LEADERSHIP

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***I like leaders who are humble visionaries, yet are willing to push the envelope and risk something for progress*.** Emerging Sage Leader

We shift in this essay and the next five to the subject of leadership, the means by which the Sage 100 drive their civic engagements. The sages describe and explain their own leadership strengths and capabilities, and they proceed to identify qualities they both admire and dislike in other leaders. They then reflect on their own leadership styles over the years and identify behaviors they have discontinued because they are no longer found useful or appropriate to how they lead today.

Because all but one emerging sage leader is employed in a paid official capacity, each possesses the legitimate leadership authority that is vested in his or her office. In addition, most emerging sages attribute many of the characteristics of Jim Collins' Level 3, 4, and 5 leadership and Robert Greenleaf's Servant Leadership to themselves (see Chapter One). They identify as their main leadership strengths passionate vision, action-orientation, strong communications skills, a desire to work through others, and a focus on building collaborative relationships. Emerging sages are highly aware of these leadership qualities, and most tend to believe their styles come from who they authentically are as persons.

Emergent Leadership Strengths

Vision and action-orientation. Emerging sages describe this leadership strength variously as will power, reading situations quickly, seeing ahead rather than working things out as they arise, and identifying opportunities and problems and breaking them into manageable action steps. They

identify dreaming big, taking an idea and bringing it to fruition, willingness to do whatever is necessary to move a project forward, and having a "go-get-em" team attitude as additional strengths:

> *My strengths are based in action. I am a big, loud character and work hard. I believe in shooting for the stars. I think a lot of people feel we are living in a time when we really need to go for it. There are many people who don't like being on the edge, but I am ok with it for myself. I consider myself an activist, though I have learned to pick my battles.*

> *My principal strength is driving projects forward to completion, an ability I acquired in all of my jobs. If you want to get something done, this skill is essential. I get results, and I finish on time. For me it's about taking action and making mistakes, learning from them, and moving on quickly. I am definitely a multi-taker, so I'd say my strengths are mainly rooted in action.*

> *I believe that my strength as a leader comes from being an example of doing what needs to be done. I see this as partly action and partly style. There's no work that is below me. I'm willing to do whatever needs to be done in order to move a project forward. People are often inspired to help by seeing me getting things accomplished.*

Passion. Emerging sages describe passion in a number of ways: high energy and enthusiasm, intense goal-orientation, and unbridled optimism:

> *Passion is my greatest strength. I was always pretty introverted, so it was counter to my personality to be involved in any kind of leadership. But I can't help myself because I feel so strongly about things. And from a very young age, I've been an optimist and believed in change. That if we collectively put our minds to something, we can make it happen.*

> *I think what makes me effective in the work that I do is passion. When you find passion, you can't help but go! I'm a young mother, I'm working, I'm starting my own business, and I'm involved in all of these other things that I just can't turn off because I love them!*

I have always been an energetic and driven leader. My strengths are in being an activist and in being goal-oriented. I can be intense, and when I have a vision I follow through to reach my goal. I am very passionate about whatever I am pursuing!

The questions of equality and justice have lived in me since high school, when I was studying cultural disparities and how the segregation that happens in schools is related to achievement. What has developed out of all of this is a passion for collaboration. I love working with like-minded people to close those gaps.

Personal leadership style. Emerging sages place great value on their personal leadership style. Sometimes this is reflected in aggressive action, taking situations by the throat and making them work. Others identify themselves as risk-takers and depend on learning from their mistakes. At times, personal style involves getting others on board and leading through them, or by "walking their talk" and leading by example. The leadership style of some emerging sages is born out of a principle-centered value system. And there are those who love to exercise their leadership quietly behind the scenes while helping others to achieve great things:

I definitely have a personal style which some people like and others don't. I am pretty straightforward and honest with people. As is typical of politics, half of the people hate you and you can never win. I have never been afraid to tell people what my beliefs are and to justify my decisions. And I think people respect me because I don't lie to them. I also have a personal philosophy: I do what I do for the good of the community, not for any personal agenda that I might have.

Being principle-centered is really important. Everything I do is interconnected and has a higher purpose, so it motivates me to give my absolute best in all that I do. It is based in a love for people that came from watching my dad and mom and others I know. Anyone I have ever looked up to has been a servant type of a person—all deeply based in faith.

My main strength lies in quiet action. I do not need the limelight, but I like to see a product at the end of the day. I like to sponsor events, donate merchandise for good causes, and

step-up and accomplish something good. I have skills in organizing and seeing things through to successful completion. As a leader, I am the quiet support behind the scenes that makes things happen.

Personal qualities. Closely related to emerging sages' leadership styles are the personal qualities that define who they are as people. This includes such attributes as integrity, fairness, honesty, consistency, patience, tolerance, and compassion for others:

My travels in Africa as an undergraduate put me on a certain political course. Based on these experiences, there is a political advocacy and social justice strain in me that is very strong. I try to empathize with a situation, whether it be a conflict or social dynamic, and I feel it serves me well as a problem solver, or problem resolver.

I think the heart of my leadership is compassion. I've seen so much in my family, sad things happening to people I love. I am fascinated by the failings and possibilities of human beings, and I have an underlying belief in the goodness of humanity. When I was younger I was more strident, with strong political views. Now I'm more accepting of others. Everyone has a story, and I try to keep that in mind.

I am not very political. I am focused on creating good relationships and working with people with similar concerns. I am a very good listener and a creative thinker. I am into results and working hard, and I am a good communicator. I am fair, accept other people's ideas, am consistent and trustworthy, and am not ego-engaged when making a decision.

My major strength is an ability to bring together groups of people, help them to find common ground, and to share motivation and vision. I do this through building personal relationships. I like ideas and am good at getting groups of people to accomplish things. I like to find people who are better than me at implementing ideas, and then empowering and helping them do the job.

Strong people skills. Most emerging sage leaders believe they have very strong people skills in the areas of communications, relationship-building, and collaboration. They regard careful listening and presentation skills as the most important:

> *I am willing to be influenced by those I interact with, and I am open to change. I am not overly concerned with who or what organization is credited with any success that we might be associated with, only that the effort itself is successful. I have had many experiences in a multitude of arenas, which allows me to bring forth new ideas and initiatives that potentially can benefit our community.*

> *While I think I'm more analytical than creative, I also seem to have a way with words. The creative side, due to the demands of my job, atrophies sometimes—although I am a strong believer in the idea that infinity is in a grain of sand, and opportunities for being creative exist everywhere in the day-to-day world. Perhaps because of the combination of word-smithing and analysis, I am usually able to keep groups on track, hopefully without losing creative vision.*

Building collaborative relationships. Emerging sages also place great value on their ability to build and sustain collaborative relationships. This has to do with establishing mutual bonds, valuing teamwork, finding common ground, bringing people together to have fun, meeting new people and making friends, and creating trust:

> *I've worked hard to develop connections and relationships with people, and over the years I've delivered what I said I would do. I think I've built credibility with people where they say, "If she says she's going to do this, it will be done." I'm very forthright in the work I do. Being a good public speaker and running a good meeting are also strengths that have served me well.*

> *I am really passionate about what I do. That's probably my biggest strength. I absolutely believe that we can make a difference. I think my passion comes from my personal style, but I also believe it is how my organization is set-up. To me, leadership seems to be all about*

building relationships. Without this, you cannot be a leader.

A major strength is that I really like bringing people together and having fun. I participate in a group by making people feel comfortable and accepted. I also appreciate people for what they bring to the table, recognizing all of their gifts and giving them room and space to express them.

I believe in leading by example, and I strongly value personal relationships and teamwork. To be truly effective, I believe one must work in partnership with diverse groups of individuals and organizations across the various sectors of our community—government, nonprofits, businesses, and faith based institutions. I believe that as diverse as we may be as community members, we share much more in common than not, and that we all value improvements we can enact together to create a healthier community.

Resource development and procurement. Then there are emerging sages who exercise their leadership through donating merchandise for good causes, raising funds to hire nonprofit staff, and connecting people to non-material resources:

One of my personal missions is to connect people to resources –whether through coaching where I link people to their personal resources or just connecting two people that I know are interested in similar things.

Forging a Unified Team

The emerging sages talk about being able to get a team together and move forward in a particular direction. They see themselves as being skilled recruiters of talent and are able to bring the right persons onto a team. They are also able to match volunteers with organizations needing help; they "share the wealth" of talent with others and ensure that everyone's views are heard and respected. They believe it is not enough just to draw people into a project; their views and contributions must to be honored as well. The emerging sages encourage openness and are skilled at facilitating genuine dialogue. This is the process of empowerment, which ensures broad-based participation and commitment.

Emerging sage leaders acknowledge it is not always easy to bring together people from different backgrounds, who hold different perspectives, and who don't necessarily share the same values: "How do you bring together people with various strengths and abilities? How do you forge a unified team that is organized around a specific purpose?" One of the emerging sages talks about "building trust through competence." Another says she builds trust by always doing exactly what she says she is going to do. Others are "direct, but diplomatic." These insights all point to interpersonal competence and proficiency in leading teams. Trust comes not from the words that leaders pronounce, but from the actions they take in consistently and skillfully working on behalf of the team's defined outcomes.

The Humble Warrior

The phrase, "humble warrior" seems to capture the essence of the strengths, capabilities, and value that many emerging sages bring to their civic involvement. This kind of leader is a warrior with the passion and energy of mid-life. This man or woman doesn't just take on a cause to win the war. He or she is fighting for something that benefits other people in the community. Furthermore, these leaders are humble about their accomplishments. They would rather draw attention to the contributions being made by others than to themselves.