

THE SUSTAINING LEADER

“When in crisis, people long for the leadership of their elders.”¹

What leadership challenges and strengths do elders experience?

THE CHALLENGE

A Change of Pace

Maybe you can’t multi-task at a breakneck pace for 12 hours a day anymore (if, in fact, you ever really could). So what? Leave all the running-around-in-circles to the young and inexperienced. What they spend hours on — just you like did, back in the day — you now solve with a single comment.

It turns out that leading doesn’t require nearly as much energy when you already know what you’re doing.

Passing the Torch

Whether it’s 10 years from now or six months, deciding how to hand off a project, job, or company you’ve helped flourish isn’t easy. It’s a role that will require your best judgement, critical analysis, and instincts — and the wisdom to start well in advance.

STRENGTHS



Investing in the Present

Research on Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) tells us that when our time horizons are shortened, we prefer to invest in existing relationships and utilize current skill sets, rather than developing new ones. Older leaders are therefore more likely to focus on cultivating communities and companies they know well — rather than chasing shiny new opportunities — or distractions.²



Becoming a Business Sage

The trend of extending mandatory retirement ages — and, in some cases, doing away with them entirely — means that older people are leading for longer. Increases in health and longevity allow these “business sages” to lend experience to their companies in good times and bad.³



Building a Legacy

Research shows that leaders who are focused on the well-being of future generations are also highly effective. This quality, known as “generativity,” gives older leaders a unique perspective in multi-generational workplaces. While younger leaders may seek short-term personal or organizational returns, established leaders can consider the long-term impact of their decisions.⁴

LIFELONG LEADERSHIP

Great leaders are made at every stage of life. Whether just getting started or planning our legacies, we can integrate the challenges and benefits of each life chapter into powerful leadership approaches.



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¹ Paraphrased from a quote from Plutarch of Chaeronea in “Should an old man engage in politics?”

² Shavit, Y.Z., Chi, K, and L.L. Carstensen. “Age and Time Horizons Are Associated with Preferences for Helping Colleagues.” *Work, Aging and Retirement*. 2023; 9(3): 280–290. <https://doi.org/10.1093/workar/waac024>

³ Woods, Bob. “From Disney to Target to Boeing, retirement is a thing of the past for CEOs.” CNBC, Dec 11, 2022.

⁴ Zacher H, Rosing K, Henning T, Frese M. “Establishing the next generation at work...” *Psychology and Aging*. 2011; 26(1): 241-52. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021429>