The Silver Tsunami and the NEW VISION Program—Version Two

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In my first article about the “Silver Tsunami,” I reviewed the business impact of baby boomers looking to exit their businesses. Over two million businesses and approximately twenty-five million people will be affected. To help mitigate the risks of these complex business transitions, the NEW VISION program was created for people one-to-five years from retirement. The program focuses on succession, talent management, and the development of transition action plans.

Since the launch of the NEW VISION program, a second version was requested for people already retired and struggling. These senior adults had no real succession plans; their organizational exits were disruptive, sometimes traumatic; and businesses and stakeholders were negatively affected. These retired senior adults are typically dissatisfied, discontent, and sometimes depressed with very self-limiting beliefs about their futures.

This second article about the Silver Tsunami presents ideas about how both versions of the NEW VISION program can align with faith-based adult education programs and lifelong learning academies, something I’ll discuss later in the article. There are many creative ways to identify, develop, and deploy the wisdom, experience, and talents of senior adult members of churches and academies. Version two of the NEW VISION program is designed to help senior adults recognize how their purpose has been and can continue to be expressed through their lifelong careers. A lifelong career based on purpose enhances the wellbeing of self, others, enterprises, and communities.
Finding Our Way Forward

As we age and advance through our lifelong careers, we continually find new ways to care about people and organizations, to contribute, and to achieve results. Early on, our independent contributor roles define our duties and responsibilities, while we rely on others’ support to achieve results. Our own success as independent contributors often begets opportunities to lead and achieve results through others as we become supervisors, team leaders, and, in time, department heads.

If our career aspirations, performance record, talents, and potential align with even higher leadership positions, then we may earn opportunities to achieve results through entire enterprises. We drive toward professional and personal excellence, and we can be blindsided when others start asking about our retirement. The topic seems to surface out of nowhere, and many of us avoid or delay such discussions. But like it or not, retirement inevitably comes in one form or another, and our titles, duties, and responsibilities vanish or change significantly.

With retirement, the ways we contributed through past employers and professional roles may no longer be available. For some, community service is no longer a priority. These senior adults want to address other important personal opportunities and issues, and they accomplish their sense of purpose in self-directed ways that are important to them.

Retirement may create a void or gap for those who aspire to live purposefully by contributing to others, to enterprises, and to communities. Their professional careers, interests, motivations, time, and talents have equipped them to become involved in new and meaningful ways. But their new challenge is to figure out where to go, who to talk with, how to discover opportunities—determining what is really needed or wanted—and exactly what they have to offer.

Baby boomers are the largest group within the Silver Tsunami, and the author of this article is right in the middle of this cohort. So, I will serve as an example of someone facing the prospect of new life challenges, transitions, and opportunities. A quick disclosure: feeling lost is a familiar experience. Having been lost in the Pisgah National Forest several years ago, I recall the reassuring words of the first park ranger I encountered: “You’re not lost, you’re right here!” The same applies to retirees: they’re not lost, they’re right where they are. Now it’s time to discover the way forward!

To get my bearings, I purposefully explored potential areas to establish a new “basecamp” from which to launch the next life chapter. Central Florida was one option since my wife and I had lived there previously and had a basic network of relationships.
To obtain a big-picture perspective about current and future opportunities, I attended several regional or metro-area long-term visioning initiatives. These initiatives typically establish committees of professionals focused in several strategic areas, including talent pipelines—one of my primary areas of professional interest. The committees take specific tactical actions to identify and prepare the people who will help bring the vision to reality. In Central Florida, these currently focus on high school- and college-level students, with outstanding results. High school graduation rates are going up, and collaborative internships between schools and businesses are producing more employable graduates.

After attending several talent pipeline meetings, I started visualizing talent pipelines from a lifelong perspective. *Lifelong* talent management should extend from early childhood through senior adulthood. Many examples come to mind. Head Start and similar programs have addressed early childhood development for decades. Reading, general academic tutoring support, and talent development initiatives are available in most communities for elementary school age children. Middle school career awareness programs have been around for a long time. Internships develop and manage the talents of high school and college age students and keep talent pipelines flowing. Through self-directed activities and employer-provided education programs, many working adults grow and develop their talents.

But what about the later chapters of life? Are talent management programs available for senior adults? Are we systematically discovering, developing, and deploying our senior adults’ talents and experiences? While there are memory care and dementia services, are there specific talent management programs designed to stimulate the healthy brains of senior adults? Are these stimulated, wisdom-filled brains being utilized at strategic points across a lifespan talent pipeline, or is this valuable resource being under-appreciated or, even worse, ignored?

**Lifelong Talent Management: A Delicate and Complex Pipeline**

It takes a very long time to produce a great senior adult. Ancient Greek philosophers estimated that 60-plus years of living, nonstop learning, and ongoing mentoring are required to produce competent future senior level leaders. Modern developmental psychology research clearly reveals capacity for continuous growth throughout the lifespan and supports the hypotheses of Aristotle and Plato.

Studies of crystallized and fluid intelligence have revealed some fascinating findings. For example, it takes decades of living to produce wisdom, perhaps the highest form of crystallized intelligence. Peak performance levels of crystallized intelligence may not occur until the sixth decade of life. In significant contrast, the speed of cognitive processing (fluid
intelligence) peaks in early- to mid-stages of adulthood. Both wisdom and speed are needed; we can’t afford to ignore either. This is especially important with talents that have taken decades of careful management to develop and refine.

The talent pipeline is delicate and complex. Viewed from a lifelong talent management perspective, senior adults can plug in, make a difference, and bring real strength, depth, and breadth to the process in an incredible number of ways. All they need is a clear vision and a well-thought-out action plan aligned to their purposes, interests, preferences, wisdom, experience, and talents.

**Headwinds to Deploying Senior Adults’ True Wealth**

As a senior adult, I’m biased. Acknowledging this limitation, I still assert that it is a profound mistake for our communities to miss out on all that baby boomers and other senior adults offer. Many understand that wealth comes in many forms and would like to give more than money. In fact, I argue that the deep reservoir of senior adults’ *true wealth* includes wisdom, experience, and talent. And I believe we must do a better job of transferring our true wealth!

A comment by a 70s-something student of mine suggested that others recognize the need for enhanced *true wealth* transfer. She recalled thinking at the point of retirement, “With two master’s degrees and all this knowledge and experience, what am I supposed to do?” This person and hundreds of thousands of other senior adults have untapped talents. They want to matter, and they are ready, willing, and able to be as generous as we can imagine.

 Those who want to live with purpose must take the initiative, clearly communicate offers of their true wealth, and not always wait for others to ask for help. However, I have personally encountered headwinds to deploying what I have to offer—some of my own creation and some produced by others.

**We Limit Ourselves**

As an example of self-limiting headwinds, consider benchmarks from your past. For example, thinking, “I used to lead (fill in the organization’s name)” or “I used to be paid (fill in the total compensation amount)”. These kinds of irrelevant benchmarks lead to self-handicapping beliefs such as, “I used to be somebody, but obviously not anymore” or other non-constructive mindsets about aging. The net effect: we limit ourselves and disrupt the transfer of our true wealth before we even leave the house!
As an alternative, perhaps we need to remember lessons learned from Jim Collins about the differences between good and great companies (Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don’t, Harper-Collins Publishers, 2001). Among several organizational characteristics, great companies always had great leaders, what he labelled “Level 5 Leaders.” Collins found that Level 5 Leaders consistently demonstrated two characteristics: humility and determination. I’m learning first-hand that humility is also required to be a great senior adult. To become great, a good starting point for me is to effectively manage my ego and my biases about aging.

Others Limit Us

Besides our own self-limiting beliefs, some headwinds are introduced by others. Similar to my self-imposed limitations, these obstacles often take the form of subtle and overt biases, prejudices, and stereotypes about older people. My own mistakes are one thing, but can you believe ageism still occurs despite federal laws and regulations designed to prevent it? Can you believe that “old people” are still being kicked to the curb by online and face-to-face employment practices?

Beyond these ageism issues, I have also learned that it is very important to recognize the doubts and fears of younger people. Many of them are understandably concerned about their job security and anxious about future employment opportunities. Their worldview often pictures everyone, even “older people,” as threats or competitors for limited resources. I have heard younger people describe their elders as “Woodstocks” (burned out hippies from the ’60s) and overly-indulged recipients of gifts from the Greatest Generation.

Bottom line: in a world perceived as lacking (not abundant) where older people are net consumers (not producers), it is a zero-sum game in the minds of many younger people. No wonder some find it hard to believe senior adults can be friends, mentors, advocates, or valuable sources of guidance and feedback. A high degree of determination will be needed to bust through this fear- or doubt-based resistance to senior adults. (You might recall that Jim Collins identified determination as a differentiating characteristic with Level 5 Leaders in great organizations.)

Leaning Against the Wind

Despite these headwinds, do you agree that there are many community challenges senior adults can and should help address? For starters, what about helping to close the opportunity gaps experienced by those in challenged neighborhoods? What about helping to create environments that promote health? Or to re-establish safe and secure schools that facilitate learning and development?

If we want to be actively involved with bringing about these and other community improvements, then Level 5 Leadership from senior adults will be mandatory. Level 5
Leadership as “retirees” will not be easy, especially when fancy titles or roles that empower us are no longer available. Despite the obstacles, I’m still not ready to be kicked the curb! My action steps will involve:

- Improving awareness of beliefs that either limit or enhance the transfer of true wealth—wisdom, experience, and talent—and,

- Genuinely and consistently behaving in ways that reflect humility and determination.

**Lifelong Learning**

Lifelong learning academies and faith-based education programs for senior adults are springing up all over the United States. Many are affiliated with colleges, universities and churches. Some are housed within city or county departments of aging or parks and recreation, and some are independent, stand-alone non-profits. While there is substantial variability, most strive to provide information, referral resources, and direct services for senior adults who want to continue learning and serving their communities.

Direct services often include a variety of basic to advanced educational programs across a wide range of stimulating topics. Health and other dimensions of wellbeing are core program areas. Programs are almost always in a group format that facilitates social interactions, connections, and relationship building. The wellbeing benefits of social support are consistently found in research studies.

Many program participants bring highly successful work histories and great life experiences to lifelong learning academies and programs. Through volunteering, some participants become future program faculty members. Some academies organize individual specialists and teams of collaborating subject matter experts ready to address community needs. For no-to-low fees, the wisdom, experience, and talent of senior adults is available to enlightened communities that recognize this valuable resource and make use of it.

As memberships grow, some lifelong learning academies and faith-based adult education programs become robust and valuable “BRAIN TRUSTS.” Members’ capabilities, interests, and availability are documented in well-designed databases for quick identification of senior adults prepared to respond to requests for service. Talent deployment opportunities are limited only by our imagination.
Here are seven basic ways to think about how a BRAIN TRUST might function:

1. A BRAIN TRUST is a group of senior adults motivated to give to others and to communities.

2. A faith-based program or lifelong learning academy provides an excellent vehicle to initiate and build a BRAIN TRUST. In both settings membership processes and practices designed to discover, develop, and deploy the true wealth assets of senior adults can be established.

3. With a BRAIN TRUST, communities have deep pools of multi-talented individuals and teams ready, willing, and able to be deployed when community challenges present.

4. BRAIN TRUST deployments include individual volunteers, advisors, mentors, program facilitators, and teams of subject matter experts.

5. A well-designed BRAIN TRUST database can facilitate efficient information management, problem-solving, and constructive outcomes for all parties.

6. A BRAIN TRUST database provides a defined portfolio of true wealth assets: the interests, preferences, wisdom, experiences, and talents of participating members.

7. A lifelong learning academy or faith-based adult education program actively manages and administers its BRAIN TRUST database, and there are fiduciary responsibilities involving well-thought out plans for asset distribution.

The Value of Giving Back

The benefits associated with BRAIN TRUSTS do not flow in just one direction. Researchers have consistently found that those who give to others also receive positive outcomes. Those who demonstrate they care by sharing their wisdom and other resources experience a stronger sense of generativity and integrity. With reflection, they know with certainty they have a purpose and a reason for being on earth. They know they matter and make a positive difference. All of this promotes contentment and wellbeing.

Having a strong sense of purpose—a reason to get up in the morning, knowing that people are depending on us, feeling that we are making important contributions and making a difference in this world—can contribute to healthy aging, including brain health. Giving back by using our wisdom, experience, and talents in the service of something much larger than we are promotes health and wellbeing for everyone—all members of our communities.
Pre- and post-retirement, senior adults have a rare and wonderful opportunity to take inventory and create a NEW VISION, a fresh start! They have fewer encumbrances, more time, and freedom to redirect their energies and resources. When the true wealth, the wisdom, experience, and talents of senior adults is appreciated and respected, some of us are prepared to give it all away. Yes, in time this may include money.

The NEW VISION Program: Version Two

Not everyone has had the opportunity to experience a well-planned succession and talent management program through their previous employer. Consequently, terrific opportunities to transfer the true wealth of many senior adults have not been realized. To take meaningful action, HCC is pleased to announce The NEW VISION Program—Version Two. To request a brochure or for more information about program offerings through faith-based adult education and lifelong learning academies in your area, please contact us today.

This article is dedicated to Mr. Charlie G. Carney. Charlie was a wonderful colleague and friend who consistently demonstrated restraint when those around him acted as if their hair was on fire. His brilliance was made evident by his reserved, quiet manner. He was one of the most talented project managers and technical writers I have known. Additionally, Charlie had a terrific sense of humor and appreciation for visual aesthetics. Now that he is fully in heaven those of us fortunate to have known him on earth celebrate his significantly larger talent-focused deployments.

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