
Mid-Life Leadership

By Jim Selman



It almost goes without saying that over the past 50 to 100 years the world has undergone one transformation after another as technology moves us faster and faster, systems complexity compounds, populations increase and pressures on the environment seem to expand exponentially. There is a long and growing list of problems that seem intractable to most of us. Most have become global in nature, defying solution within national borders. This doesn't mean we have no solutions. But without leadership and individuals committed to making a difference, implementing solutions—even when we know they can succeed—remains a dream.

At the same time, we are at the beginning of the greatest demographic anomaly in history. For the first time, the developed nations will have more 'older' people than younger. We are told there are roughly 90 million 'Baby Boomers' in North America. In the United States alone, 22.9 million people will reach age 55 this year. This means approximately 62,500 people can potentially retire each day. By 2014, an estimated 34.3 million people will be 55 or older (raising the daily retirement potential to 94,000 people¹). In fact, most of the 90 million 'Boomers' have either already retired from full-time careers, are in the process of retiring or will be retiring in the next few years. With better public health education and advances in medical science, it is anticipated that the majority will remain more or less healthy and can expect to live for the next 30 to 40 years².

What is in store for this population? More importantly, what will be the impact of this aging population on our society, on our culture, on the world?

Our contemporary culture of aging is based on the idea that people ending their careers enter a period of increased leisure, reflection, higher learning and gradual decline. While the point in time that marks our experience of 'being young' versus 'being old' is different for each of us, our paradigm of aging is still based on a belief that 'young is better' and 'old' means losing power, prestige and possibility.

Most of us believe the 'second half' of life offers less than the first. Rather than define midlife as any particular decade or era, I propose that anyone can define their 'second half of life' at any time in their lives as "whatever I have left". For some people, this recognition occurs early in their careers; for others, partway through. For the majority of people in North American society, however, the recognition of having reached 'midlife' occurs when they approach retirement or when the family nest is emptied.

What if most of us decided at midlife that the rest of our lives will be about taking on the difficult problems in our communities and the world? Why not challenge conventional wisdom about what is and is not possible as we grow older? Instead of taking off our leadership jackets as we retire, we could choose differently—we could decide to "retire our careers" and to engage ourselves with the future by generating a renewed commitment to making a difference.



AGE AND LEADERSHIP

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is not a function of age.*

There are a lot of ‘older’ leaders—individuals making a substantial difference in the world while in their 60s, 70s and 80s. Some people that come to mind are Ted Turner and Warren Buffet in the business world, Alan Greenspan and Henry Kissinger in politics, Bill Gates

and Jimmy Carter as great humanitarians, and Gail Sheehy and Ralph Nader in the arena of social change. With few exceptions, these individuals were leaders when they were ‘younger’, and they continue to be as effective—often more so—as they age.

The capacity for leadership is, therefore, not a function of age.

However, for the vast majority of people, the **willingness and commitment to lead is a function of age**. This is partly because of a variety of culturally embedded notions associated with what is and is not possible as we grow older, combined with considerable mythology about the topic of leadership itself—what it is, how it happens and whether or not it can be learned and exercised by anyone.

WHY MID-LIFE LEADERSHIP?

Scarcely a conference goes by without someone making a plea for more leadership. It doesn’t matter whether the conference is about sustaining our economic success, building a more vibrant and effective not-for-profit sector or reforming government to be more accountable and responsive to the population it serves. Leadership is lacking in virtually every profession—from accounting to nursing, law to the classrooms, social work to politics. Building or finding leaders has become a growing obsession. Why this focus on leadership?

From one perspective, life does go on without it. Individually, we continue doing pretty much what we always do without necessarily being a leader in various situations. Communities, societies and even civilization can exist, with few or even poor leaders, although not necessarily as well as they might with good leadership. Said another way, our lives and our world will continue in what I call a ‘circumstantial drift’ (historical inertia) whether we have leaders or not.

What leadership provides is an alternative to the ‘drift’. Not much of significance happens without it. So if things are going well and we are content with the status quo, we don’t need leaders.

Yet who today can say that things in this world are ‘going well’?

Certainly not youth. Their focus on changing on the world, making it better, solving some of the intractable problems they feel have been left to them is, by itself, an admission that the status quo is not acceptable. Their enthusiasm and unbridled passion for change is a formidable force; however, just as their parents did before them, they, for the most part, try to address issues by approaching them with a black-and-white perspective, by resisting what is. Resistance actually establishes whatever is being resisted. And so the problems they wish to address become further entrenched in a never-ending conflict between what is and what ‘should’ be. Over time, their enthusiasm wanes as they see fewer advances being made than they had intended. The possibilities for lasting change seem to dwindle, leading these inspired and



inspiring individuals into resignation and, eventually, disengaging them from participating in change—from participating as leaders.

Their parents' and grandparents' generations have been affected by this same tendency to become resigned as they grow older and accumulate more experience. Resignation is a mood and a state in which a person is committed to the view that no possibility exists. It sets up a downward spiral that does not allow for a reality that is any different from predictable variations on what already exists. While it is easy to see how we, as individuals, can become resigned over the years, it is more difficult to contemplate what might happen when an entire population becomes reconciled to 'no possibilities'.

The 'Baby Boom' generation has shaped our culture and our society over the past 60 years, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. If the 'Boomers' buy into the story of generations past that "old age equals decline", then we should become very concerned. We will be setting up a ***massive negative paradigm shift***—from a future occurring as a possibility to one of broad resignation in which ***nothing matters***. This context in which we are aging is fundamental to whatever we or anyone else wishes to accomplish in the decades ahead.

If we are to be responsible for the world and leave it in better shape than we found it, we cannot buy into the decline story. Instead, we can choose to see age as a possibility for growth and contribution, a possibility that also allows a space for the creation of other possibilities, other futures than ones predicated on the past. And since leadership is, fundamentally, about breaking from the historical inertia of the past, we, as individuals, can lead the way and change the paradigm by accepting and being responsible for the decline story, for 'the way it is' in our society.

Acceptance and responsibility are hallmarks of leadership at any age. We can choose to assume our role as elders and leaders on behalf of the generations who will follow in our footsteps. For at this particular time in history, the difference that will make *the* difference will be generated by those of us in midlife who take a chance, step up to the plate and make a stand for possibility.

A NEW LOOK AT RETIREMENT

If we follow media and marketing trends, retirement sounds like it's supposed to be the time to enjoy the fruits of our labors, to kick back and relax, enjoy life and let other people worry about the world's problems. The vast percentage of workers are looking forward to either stopping work altogether or at least working less, depending upon their economic circumstances. Whole industries dedicated to the leisure of older people are booming: travel, recreation, spiritual programs, late-life education and volunteering are among the options most often at the top of the 'retired person's' plans. Almost all Baby Boomers are in some stage of conversation about leaving their working commitments behind them and passing the torch to the next generation.

The choice as to *when* to retire is complex. With the raising of the age in the United States to qualify for full Social Security benefits in 2000, the lowering of the benefits for early retirees, the rising cost of living and the removal of age restrictions and taxes on older individuals, each person must assess their situation carefully. Understanding that the decision to retire is multi-dimensional, we continue to assume that most people will still try to retire as early as they can.



Interestingly, today's retirees can look forward to a long retirement: the number of years between retirement and death increased substantially during the last half of the twentieth century. Men saw a 50% increase in the average duration of their retirement years from 12 to 18, and women saw a 62% increase from 13.6 to 22 years³. As retirement occurs earlier and earlier in life and as longevity increases, the number of retired persons dependent on the Social Security system has increased from 6% in 1950 to 30% in 2000. This is anticipated to climb sharply to 40% by 2020⁴.

Extrapolating from this data, of every 1,000 people who retire, the majority will be financially independent or have a sufficient pension to make income-producing activities unnecessary, although many may choose to continue to work for as long as they are able as a matter of practical survival and independence. With median household income for the overall population being \$44,473 between 2002 and 2004⁵, it's obvious that people will be motivated to have other sources of income during their retirement in order to maintain their standard of living.

More importantly, however, than whether we will have to work to maintain that standard is ***what we will do with all of that time***. Even though we will be better off, healthier and more informed than any previous generation, the question for all of us is:

"What are we going to do with the rest of our lives—the next 30 to 40 years?"

There are lots of studies and hype about how to live a 'youthful' lifestyle, stay healthy and enjoy our 'golden years'. New magazines, websites, TV programs and books bombard us daily—all designed to sell us tips for successful aging (which mostly means enjoying our leisure and staying healthy). This narcissism mirrors the tendencies and labels that have accompanied the Baby Boom, the 'Me Generation', for the last few decades. Admittedly, many of us volunteer time to good causes; however, most of the commitment to volunteering (both on the part of the volunteers and the majority of volunteer organizations) is focused on low skilled 'helping'. Relatively few organizations exist with the express purpose of organizing retired managers and executives as advisors to various projects.

Within our society, there are no serious conversations occurring about retiring within a different context. There are even fewer opportunities to do so. What's needed is a different perspective, one in which we can choose to pick up the leadership torch, to share responsibility for what is with other committed individuals and network ourselves into communities of interest to take on the impossible problems that we either couldn't be bothered with when we were working or which were too risky to address at the time. At this point in our lives, many of us can now afford to invest our time and talents to make things happen, to break out of the drift, to clean up our messes before we die.



BEING A LEADER

Not all leaders are political or ‘in charge’ people. Anyone engaged in innovating, bringing about new ways of seeing the world or resolving problems is a leader. Leadership is a way of being in the world, a way of staying connected to life and engaged in the process of creating solutions to problems large and small.

Being a leader is also a capacity within each of us, regardless of our roles in life. Exercising and expressing leadership encompasses, at the very least, the following competencies, most of which tend to grow as we age:

- **Making distinctions.** Leaders minimize the confusion created by putting all sorts of issues and concerns in the same ‘basket’... as we grow older, we learn to not mix areas of life that don’t have to be mixed and to focus on specifics instead of generalities.
- **Building respect, relationships and trust.** This is a product of experience and wisdom. Many people develop tolerance, but leaders go beyond this to learn that everyone has something to contribute and, from their perspective, has a valid point-of-view—even when they disagree with what’s being shared.
- **Enrolling others in possibilities.** Leaders learn from observing that persuasion and convincing generally aren’t nearly as powerful as giving people a choice and making offers that empower others to contribute to what they want and need.
- **Choosing committed speaking and listening.** Leaders don’t waste a lot of time just giving their opinions. The older we get, the more we say what we mean and mean what we say.
- **Creating openings through interpretations.** One benefit of a long life is that you begin to recognize there are many interpretations of the same circumstances and events. Leaders learn to construct stories and interpretations that open pathways for creating a better future.
- **Aligning commitments.** Coordinating action is easy when we are clear where we have been and where we are going. Leadership at any age is about clarifying intentions and aligning and inspiring others to new levels of commitment and action.
- **Coaching and empowering others.** This is one of the most important contributions of leaders. In many ways, leadership and coaching are synonymous. As we grow older, we have even more to contribute than in our younger years: giving it away, even when there is more at stake, is one way to inspire and empower others to become responsible for their own thoughts, actions and lives.
- **Knowing who they are.** Leaders are clear that they are who they are committed to being, and that they are responsible for their lives and their environment. By being present to what wants to happen, they are midwives for what is emerging, rather than trying to force particular outcomes.



I am suggesting that we mobilize the millions of us who are retired, are retiring or who will be retiring in the future to take responsibility for the state of our communities and the world and to bring our talent and commitment to bear on a broad front. It is time for anyone in ‘midlife’—at any age—to take on the challenge of leaving civilization in better shape than at any time in history.

It is time for us to step up and be counted.

MOVING FORWARD

Leadership involves us all. We cannot have leaders unless and until a critical mass of people are willing to align and coordinate their actions within the context of a shared vision or possibility for creating a future—one that will not happen in the absence of leadership. To create a ‘new’ future, we could:

- **Create a new reality about age and what it means to ‘grow older’.** Our conversations need to be inclusive of the young, while challenging our cultural assumptions and beliefs of aging as a process of decline.
- **Use technology to build and network communities of committed individuals.** Mobilizing ourselves online around particular concerns—be they social, political, economic or environmental—can reignite the same kind of passionate purpose that was present in the past around stopping unjust war, civil rights and environmental concerns.
- **Link and coordinate efforts.** Sharing information and ideas can promote collaboration across a broad spectrum of new and existing projects and organizations dealing with various problems and issues.
- **Provide leadership education and coaching.** Empowering individuals to ‘think outside the box’ as they move forward will help them create new possibilities for the projects and initiatives that concern them.

Growing older doesn’t need to be a period of decline and withdrawal from the world. It can be a time of expansion, a time of creativity and innovation, a time of passion and purpose, and a time to create a legacy that future generations may aspire to.

Of course, we will take time to enjoy our leisure, appreciate life in all its wonder, and delight in the gifts of age and experience. But let us also remember that our **every choice makes a difference**. So let us stay engaged and committed to making the difference that will make **the difference**.



FOOTNOTES

¹ Taossi, Mitra. "Labor Force Projections to 2014: retiring boomers". *Monthly Labor Review* 11 (2005). Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics.
<http://stats.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/11/art3full.pdf>

² The number of disabled people over age 65 dropped from 25% to 20% between 1983 and 1998. The most rapidly growing elderly age group is those 85 and older, with a 274% increase in numbers between 1960 and 1994.
Sheehy, Gail. *Understanding Men's Passages: Discovering the New Map of Men's Lives*. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1998. 244-245.

³ Howard N. Fullerton Jr. "The Labor Force in 2006". *Monthly Labor Review* 11 (1997). Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics.
<http://stats.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1997/11/art3abs.htm>

⁴ Murray Gendell. "Retirement Age Declines". *Monthly Labor Review* 10 (2001). Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics.
<http://stats.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2001/10/art2full.pdf>

⁵ Median Household Income (2002-2004). Extract from Current Population Survey (2003, 2004, and 2005 Annual Social and Economic Supplements). US Census Bureau. 2005.
<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/income04/statemhi.html>



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