

From Senior to Silver

MAKING THE TRANSITION



Senior: *Someone who is chronologically or mentally advanced.*

Silver: *Someone who is chronologically or mentally advanced and still has gas in the tank and fire in the belly; someone who is about to do their best work.*

OWM: *Old White Men who can be seniors or Silvers.*

If you are a senior and want to advance yourself into being a Silver, here are some guidelines. If you know someone who is stuck as a senior, but you believe they could become a Silver, these guidelines can help you help them. Silvers are an important – or even vital – resource for corporations, communities and any organization with two or more people.

There are people who have thirty years of experience and there are those who have one year of experience thirty times over. The former are Silvers; the latter are seniors. Both have their place in society and in our culture, but only one can occupy an essential position in today's businesses.

Some seniors may have been seniors for a long time, maybe all their lives. They cannot remember when they first began using terms like, "I liked the way we used to do it," "These new ideas and tools are too complicated, "I am not going to learn anything new until they promote me." Most dread Mondays and look forward to Fridays. In fact, their job titles should have been RIP – Retired In Place.

"You're as old as you think you are- other people think you are based on your words and actions."

During my technician days at AT&T, which was then the largest corporation in the world, in our facility we had equipment that had bright "RIP" tags on them. This was equipment that was no

longer viable or needed but was too difficult to uninstall. By cutting power to the units and labeling them “RIP” people knew not to try and use them.

We had some human RIP equipment. Some were closer to actual retirement than others, but all were simply humored. Trying to cause them to learn newer technologies or to increase their production was like trying to teach a pig to sing. It only frustrates the pig and what would have if you succeeded? Like the retired electronic equipment, they took up space and removing them would have been more trouble than it was worth. The union could create havoc protecting them, or an age discrimination lawsuit could have kicked in.

It was not uncommon or those of us who had “gas in the tank and fire in the belly” to find our way to better and better positions within AT&T and then in other organizations. Two things had to happen for us:

- Our desire for growth had to be allowed.
- Our leaders had to be willing to let us grow, and that usually meant letting us go. Real leaders are Silvers. They do not hold people back even when they lose one of their best team members.

How can a person learn to be a Silver?

SEE THE PAST FOR WHAT IT IS

Seniors live in the past and talk about the good old days. They have forgotten that during the good old days they were already looking backward and talking about *those* good old days.

Silvers remember the past and build on it. They do not see history as the past; they see it as a path, a road to the future. They know that paths lead somewhere and wherever they are on their journey, there is more to explore.

Hiking is becoming more popular. It is a great way to exercise, be in the outdoors and socialize with other people who like to hike. It is better than golf because it does not involve spending time in the grass looking for a white ball or a nine-iron thrown out of frustration.



Which way are you facing?

Hikers are continuously looking ahead. There is nothing to be gained by looking back and wishing they were at an earlier place on their trek. Staying where they are is not an option; eventually, the hiker must move ahead or retreat.

When were you on a trail hiking? We've all done it – some more recently than others. Were you facing backward or forwards? And as you looked ahead, were there times when you could see something that was alluring, while other times your view was blocked? And were there times when it was just a walk with nothing particularly interesting to see?

That is the journey of the Silver. They recognize that every step on their journey was necessary to bring them to this place. There were challenges when they were concerned about their footing and there were places where they could sit and rest. They were proud that they had overcome the tough places and fondly remembered the times when they could restore themselves. Seniors refer to those places as the good old days; Silvers understand, "That was then; this is now."

Silvers have the ability to tie the past, their previous experiences on the path, to the present and the future.

Silvers continue their journey. Some have learned the value of completing the hike. Maybe it is an anticipated view that can only be seen with effort. Maybe it is a necessity for them to gain some value. Some hike places like Mount Everest for the notoriety, while others just to prove to themselves they can do it. Whatever the reason, the hike to success must have a purpose.

PURPOSE OR DESTINATION?

Silvers are interesting. Each Silver is all different, and they understand that. They have different abilities, experiences and education that equip them for their destiny, or destination, which few ever reach. The reason is that by the time they reach their desired destination, they have opened



themselves up to realize there is actually more they could achieve, another destination.

Silvers are goal-driven. The goals they set for themselves have a purpose behind them. Their purpose is typically not to defeat someone else but to be better than someone else. There is a difference. They do not want the other person to lose as much as they want to win. They do not see the competition as something to be destroyed; they see it as something to be conquered.

A selfish purpose rarely results in long-term success. They think that as long as they get what they want, anything is fine. A man told me once that he had friends “he hasn’t even used yet,” and later found he had no friends.

Silvers tend to be leaders. Some lead from the front, others lead from the back. Some want to take the brunt of opposition while others want to encourage the people they influence to complete their race.

Silvers will capitulate to the person who has been assigned the position of authority. Even when the Silver thinks or knows that their way is better, they will put themselves under the authority of another in the organization or they will leave. Silvers are not saboteurs; they either lead, follow or get out of the way.

Silvers either lead, follow or get out of the way

CYCLES, TRENDS AND FADS

Silvers are not surprised as often as others. When something “new” is introduced, often they have “seen this movie before.”

Having been on the path for as long as they have, they learn to recognize patterns. Some patterns are cyclical, some are trendy, and some are simply fads. From their experience and knowledge, Silvers are good at sorting them out.

This is one of the primary values of having Silvers on the team.

Cycles recur – they’ll be back. **Trends** can present opportunities for new products and services which may have long tails. **Fads** do not last but can be profitable as long as they are treated as fads, not trends.

THREE PRIMARY DRIVERS OF CHANGE

“There are two ways to respond to change: capitalize on it or capsize under it.” - Chuckism #30

Silvers recognize that change is inevitable. While seniors tend to resist change, Silvers know to anticipate it. They not only anticipate change; they know how to anticipate it. There are three primary drivers of change: Technology, Processes and Demographics.

Technology

Gordon Moore started Intel, a major manufacturer and innovator of computer chips and other devices. He created Moore's Law as it relates to chips. "The speed will double, and the price will halve every eighteen months." Each of those, speed and price, has accelerated primarily due to technological improvements. Speed more than doubles now and it does not take eighteen months. Prices can drop by factors of ten or more at the same time.

How do you know a tech product is obsolete? You can buy it. If it is on the shelf, something better is on its way.

Silvers understand this concept in technology and how it applies to other areas as well.

Small businesses and major corporations are subject to the inappropriate lure of new technologies.

An intern working for NASA was able to buy 1,100 videotapes for \$218 because the videos had been copied to a newer technology that no longer exists. It turns out these were first-generation recordings and are the clearest, most detailed archives available. Every time a recording is copied, there is some degradation. The intern sold a few of the two-inch reel-to-reel tapes to local television stations who could record over them. Fortunately, the original recordings of man's first walk on the moon were saved and sold at auction recently for \$1.8 million.

An uncle was bankrolling his nephew's new venture. They met for lunch and the uncle asked for an update. The nephew explained in detail how he was implementing some major technology equipment and what it would be capable of doing. He was surprised that his uncle was not only unimpressed, but he also seemed angry or disappointed. "What are you doing to attract customers?" the uncle asked. The Silver understood that until you have customers, you do not have a business and, therefore, do not know what technology will be needed.

Start-up entrepreneurs ask for my counsel. When they arrive in a luxury car, a limo or a rented office-on-wheels, the red flags go up.



Silvers can be reluctant to embrace new technologies. They are not being stubborn; they are evaluating the potential impact the new offering can have on them and their business. They do a cost-benefit analysis that takes into account many of the previous technological advancements that were presented to them. For instance, they were faster, but is the current speed sufficient and how soon will a faster version be available?

A CEO who has built and sold multiple software companies to the Fortune 500 companies bought his computers, the heart of his business, from Apple's reconditioned computer web site. The older models were sufficient; the latest and greatest devices would have been overkill.

Silvers tend to make technology decisions based on practicality and ROI. They do not necessarily subscribe to the latest software updates or embrace the newer gadgets. They are aware of them and make a Cycle/Trend/Fad evaluation of them before purchasing.

Processes

Seniors tend to like the way things have always been done. They will tolerate minor adjustments in their processes and think they are being innovative. Silvers constantly look for and ask for suggestions for improving their ways of doing things. This is not just in business; it is in their personal lives as well.

When I meet an OWM who is dressed the way we dressed years ago or even in high school, they are a senior, not a Silver.

Many new processes are enhancements of previous new processes. In the 1960s what we now know as consultants were Efficiency Experts who conducted time and motion studies to improve productivity in manufacturing plants. Later, ISO Certification would create jobs for more consultants. Six Sigma and Kaizen or Lean processes followed. Each took advantage of previously unavailable technologies such as computers and control devices. Looking all the way back down the historical path of process improvement, many of the principles are based on Deming's work in Japan after WWII.

As Solomon wrote, "There is nothing new under the sun." Silvers know this and often know where to look for the previous time the concept was used. For instance, Lee Iacocca was not the first CEO to turn around the Chrysler Corporation using funding from Congress.

The principles were the same in the disciplines listed above; the applications were reinvented to accommodate new factors which included technology, other processes and demographics. That continues today. Many of the new processes are more evolutionary than revolutionary; they are simply upgrading old processes, not innovations or reinventions.

Implementation is simple and non-disruptive. Innovation requires mental and physical changes which are things Silvers accommodate and seniors resist.

Surprising to some, many innovations are actually home-grown, having been developed by small businesses and individuals. Smaller organizations can be more agile than larger, more bureaucratic ones. They can develop better processes, implement them and begin reaping the benefits faster better than the big guys.

Also, some of these innovative organizations create transferrable capabilities and make them available to others. As a result, some of these innovative organizations can generate more income from royalties than they do from other sources.

Demographics

Seniors resent younger people who present themselves as authorities or as wiser or as being smarter than them. Silvers value the ideas of the younger generations.

Much is being said and written about Millennials. Most Silvers and seniors are Boomers and their thinking often seems to be 180 degrees out of phase with Millennials. Seniors are realizing that some of the Millennials ideas have merit just as Millennials are moving more towards the principles Boomers cherish.



Millennials want their careers to have meaning and, therefore, prefer to work for organizations that have higher values than revenues and profits. Corporations that support worthwhile causes are more attractive to them. They tend to value time off to overtime pay. The ideal position for many of them would be an employer who generously gives back to the community and offers flexible hours. When they find a company like that, they are willing to stay with it longer – maybe even three to five years.

Which points out another difference in Silvers and seniors. Seniors are those who grew up with the idea that the company they worked for was to be a high priority. They assumed they would work for the same organization until retirement and a gold watch. There are reasons why people change jobs more frequently now and even more reasons why gold watches are rarely offered.

I overheard two Millennials talking in an airport. One said that he enjoyed where he worked so much that he was willing to stay there for three years. After that, he said, "I will have done all I can do for them." That comment is obvious for Millennials and bizarre for Boomers.

Millennials are bringing a healthier work/life balance to the table.

Can you sense what articles like this will be covering in thirty years when the Millennials are the ones being sent out to pasture?

Silvers are learning the benefits of being less rigid and Millennials are learning the value of the basic principles of business. An organization staffed by only one demographic is doomed to failure in today's world.

All demographics are needed even in high tech start-up companies.

During the Dot-Com Boom, I served as the Sales VP for a start-up with new technology. Some of my recommendations were rejected because the company operated in "a new economy where profits were not necessary." Too much of my time was spent convincing investors to help fund the venture and some of them contributed because of my being an OWM. "Your silver hair is gold to us," was a frequent response.

What they were implying was that the OWM brings a necessary ingredient to a young organization.

The new economy failed, obviously, giving way to the proven principles of business that have lasted for centuries.



SUMMARY

Being a Silver or a senior is a choice. It is not an easy choice for some people because it can require significant changes in the way they think and act. Reprogramming our minds is best done with questions, not statements. Ask yourself or the person you are trying to help what life goals are in place. Then explore how being a Silver rather than a senior could cause those goals to happen sooner and better.

HERE IS A CHECKLIST THAT MIGHT HELP.

- Embrace change as something will be good for you. Think about how it could be beneficial, not why it won't.
- Seek new ideas; don't resist or discount them.
- Evaluate new technologies regularly; implement them when it is appropriate – probably more often than you do now.
- Listen to yourself and ask others for feedback about what they hear you saying. Since thoughts always precede actions, this may give you clues about what changes are needed.
- Be open and willing to appear stupid or even foolish.

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Being a senior or a Silver is a choice. Both have advantages and disadvantages. Only you can decide which is best for you.