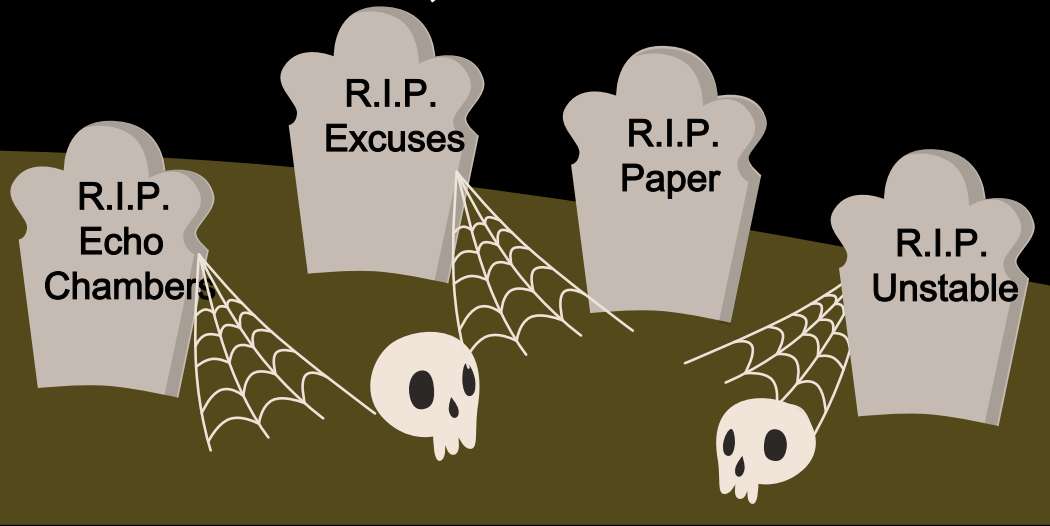
Top 10 Traits of the BEST Senior Center Leaders

2026 Show Me Summit

Columbia, MO





Setting the Stage: Scary vs. Merry

SCARY

- Reactive, avoids change
- Unstable, limited funding
- Layers of approval block progress
- One-size-fits-all programs
- Paper-heavy, error-prone admin
- Overworked staff, high burnout
- Perceived as irrelevant

MERRY

- Visionary & data-informed
- Diverse & sustainable funding
- Staff-led initiatives
- Tailored, needs-based programs
- Data tools, low admin time
- Motivated staff, low turnover
- Respected community hub





Trait #10: Lifelong Learner

"They never stop growing."

WHAT THEY DO

- Stays curious and updated on aging trends
- Always learning about things that can help the organization
- Seeks feedback and never becomes stagnant
- Attends leadership trainings and best-practice events
- Encourages experimentation within the team

BEST PRACTICES

- Work smarter, not harder
- Subscribe to aging related publicatio
- Join peer networks
- Attend conferences or new trai every quarter

RED FLAG: Complacency



Trait #9: Compassionate Leader

"They intentionally shape how the organization feels."

WHAT THEY DO

- Leads with empathy, balanced with sustainability
- Deeply understands the lives and needs of older adults
- Creates a culture of dignity and respect
- Is an unabashed senior advocate
- Modifies policies to reduce barriers for members

BEST PRACTICES

- Listen to your members actually listen
- Remove unnecessary rules
- Balances this understanding with organization needs
- Map the member journey from first v onward
- Train staff in trauma-informed care
- Host monthly 'open door' chats with

🚩 **RED FLAG: Toxic positivity or unresolved conflict**

Trait #8: Effective Communicator

"They articulate value clearly and confidently."

WHAT THEY DO

- Simplifies complexity for every audience
- Adjusts tone and language for staff, board, seniors, or media
- Provides consistent communication not just during a crisis
- Shares the center's mission and value clearly to everyone
- Has a digital media strategy: website, social, print, email

BEST PRACTICES

- Provide a weekly update for staff and board
- Practice storytelling with data
- Take a communication or leadership class
- Develop simple communication guidelines for seniors
- Website looks great and it is current



RED FLAG: Mixed signals or unclear expectations

Trait #7: Community Connector



"They expand the center's footprint beyond its walls."

WHAT THEY DO

- Positions the senior center as the community hub
- Builds relationships with officials, funders, nonprofits, volunteers
- Builds alliances rather than competing for the same resources
- Cohosts events with local partners
- Is the community SME for seniors

BEST PRACTICES

- Join local coalitions or senior netwo
- Identify 5 strategic partners
- Host partnership meetings and invit observers
- Collaborate on joint grant proposals



RED FLAG: Operating in isolation



Trait #6: Team Builder & Mentor

"Develops leaders, not just staff members."

WHAT THEY DO

- Develops people—doesn't just manage tasks
- Empowers staff to grow, contribute, and lead
- Hires people smarter than themself
- Delegates authority, not just tasks
- Allows people to fail and learn from it

BEST PRACTICES

- No echo chambers—seek diverse perspectives
- Conduct quarterly 1-on-1 development talks
- Identify high-potential staff and empower them
- Coach, don't control—guided discovery over lecture

RED FLAG: Micromanagement or avoidance

Trait #5: Operational Expert

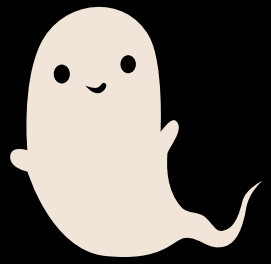
"Creates order, not chaos."

WHAT THEY DO

- Keeps day-to-day running smoothly
- Understands budgets at a granular level
- Balances logistics, budgets, staffing and safety with calm
- Creates systems that work without constant effort

BEST PRACTICES

- Map workflows for efficiency
- Implement a task management tool
- Cross-train staff to reduce single points of failure
- Always have a 'what if I win the lottery' succession plan



🚩 **RED FLAG: Constant firefighting**





"Treats funding as a long-term strategy, not a scramble."

Trait #4: Strategic Fundraiser

WHAT THEY DO

- Diversified funding is the norm, not the exception
- Treats fundraising as relationship-building
- Articulates case for support while understanding funder goals
- Connects mission to measurable outcomes
- Knows the difference between traditional and modern funding

BEST PRACTICES

- Fundraising should not be a one-person job—build a team
- Identify 3 new funding sources annually
- Learn grant writing basics or hire a coach
- Track ROI on every grant you should be able to

CHANGE THE MINDSET

- ✓ Traditional is short term and unpredictable
- ✓ Look for outcomes, not activities
- ✓ Seek restriction free funds
- ✓ Secure funds that grow with dema
- ✓ Focus on people, not programs
- ✓ Evolve from basic reports to long impact
- ✓ Make Senior Centers essential co spaces
- ✓ Traditional Funding supports surv mentality



RED FLAG: Last-minute grant chasing

Trait #3: Adapatable & Open to Change

"Pivots without panic."

WHAT THEY DO

- Normalizes change so it is less scary for the team
- Provides clear communication even during stress
- Normalizes experiments and learning from failure
- Embraces innovation—ideas, tech, shifting demographics, updated best practices

BEST PRACTICES

- Communicate the 'why' before th
- Pilot a small tech tool or new se before mass rollout
- Gather feedback after every cha
- Attend conferences to learn abo emerging options



RED FLAG: Resistance to change or emotional reactivity



"Leads with evidence, not assumptions."

Trait #2: Data-Informed Decision Maker

WHAT THEY DO

- Recalls key numbers quickly (programs, reach, outcomes
- Uses metrics to shape programs and services
- Knows quantitative data AND the human stories behind it
- Treats reports as insight, not paperwork
- Tracks outcomes (health & engagement), not just services



BEST PRACTICES

- Attend a data literacy work
- Track key metrics monthly define your KPIs
- Use data in every funding conversation
- Combine data + human st more funding

Trait #1: Visionary Thinker

"Sees the big picture and sets a clear direction."

WHAT THEY DO

- Explains where the center will be in 5 and 10 years
- Thinks long-term—Thriving, not just 'keeping the doors open'
- Shifts focus from attendance numbers to community impact
- Aligns staff, board, and funders around a clear direction
- Anticipates demographic, funding, and technology shifts

- Identify 3 trends affecting seniors (e.g., transportation, funding)
- Set a 5-10yr strategic plan
- Follow thought leaders in aging services
- Share your “secret sauce” with staff & future successor



🚩 **RED FLAG: Busy work without direction**

The Pyramid of Excellence

The Apex of Thriving

Lifelong Learner

Compassionate/ Member Centered

Effective Communicator

The Core of Success

Operational Expert

Team Builder/ Mentor

Community Connector

The Foundation of Excellence

Data Driven Decision Maker

Visionary Thinker

Strategic Fundraiser



Leadership Self-Assessment Scorecard

1 Needs Development 2 Occasional Strength
3 Consistent Performer 4 Strong Skill 5 Exceptional Leader

TRAIT	YOUR RATING	ACTION PLAN
Visionary Thinker: Sees the big picture and sets a clear direction for the center's future: 1 -, 5- and 10-year plan!		Set a 1-5-10yr plan / Follow aging thought leaders
Data-Informed Decision Maker: Uses metrics and insights to shape programs, track progress, and prove impact to funders and stakeholders.		◊●³ Í ╔╩ÅæıĒ╚╠ ╣╠╣Ĥ←╗ŶJ╩ĦĒř LŇ³ Ĥ³ Ⅰ╣╠╣LĮĬ ┤╣Ň╞╣‼ LLI Í ╣╠╣ūř ●Ē³ Ĥ╞╠╣Ē
Adaptable & Open to Change: Embraces innovation —whether it's new tech, shifting demographics, or updated best practices in aging services.		Pilot a small tech tool / Gather feedback on changes
Strategic Fundraiser: Knows where to look for money and how to make the case —from grants to sponsorships to community drives.		Identify 3 new sources / Build donor relationships
ö □ř ●³ Ĥ╞╠╣³ ╕ŲJŵ□ř ●ĤıLÂŕ ř □ĒĿĤ←╞ LŇ³ ŶBĦ╣BŇ³ ŶLĦĬ ┤┤╡‼ LĒ╠ ╣╠╣Ĥ←╗ŶE Ĺ³ ╕³ ┤Í ╡‼ LLI ╣╠!╡ĒĿĤ╡ ĒωŲĹĬ Ň‼ř ĤĒωĻĒĤ³ Ỳ ┤‼ωĻĿ┤ŇLĒ³ _ř ĤŶLŬ╡Ĥ←ĻĹ³ ╕╠ ĹĿ╣╠╣ ˙ Ňř ┤Í ř ψ		Map workflows/ Cross -train staff/ Automate processes
Team Builder & Mentor: Develops a strong, motivated staff and empowers them to grow, contribute, and lead with confidence.		, B╣╠╣B, ĒĿĻĦŇř ┤ĤĒ_ŶLĿĿ┤ŇLĿĿ╠ □╣╠Ůř ●Ŀ╞╡!←ĦĿ╣╠Ĥř ┤ĤĒ³ ╕Ē
Community Connector: Builds strong relationships with city officials, funders, nonprofits, volunteers, and local businesses to expand support and collaboration.		~╣╠╡ĹĿ╣╠³ ╕ĤĿ╣╠╣ ĒĻĻĦŇř ┤ĤĒ_ŶLĿŲĒĤ●³ Ĥř ‼╡Í ĿĿ³ ●Ĥ╣╠ř ●Ē
Effective Communicator: Shares the center's mission and value clearly to everyone; media, city or concerned family member.		Weekly staff update / Practice storytelling with data
; ╣╠╠ □³ ĒĒ╡╣╠³ Ĥř ĿĤř³ Ňř ●ŭĿĤř³ ŇĒĿŬ╡ĤĿĦĿ╠ □³ Ĥ←ŶωĻŇř ř □╕ŶĿĬĿ┤Ňř ●ĒĤ³ ┤ŇĒĿĤ←╞ Ŀ╡ĦĒūř ĒĿ ³ ┤ŇĿ╣╠ř ř ŇĒĿ╣╠_Ŀ╣╠ŇŇř ●ĿĻŇĬ ╕ĤĒωĻĿ┤ŇĹĿ●ř ³ Ĥř ĒĿĻĻĹĹĬĹ ╕ĤĬ ●ř Ŀ╣╠_ĻŇ╡‼┤╡ĦŶĻĿ┤ŇĻ●ř Ē□ř Í Ĥψ		Open door chats / Volunteer in your own programs
Lifelong Learner: Stays curious and updated on aging trends, technology, and leadership practices. Always evolving.		Subscribe to publications/ Attend training or events

What's in a score?

45–50	Visionary Leader	*Excelling across the board! Keep mentoring others and innovating for long-term success.*
35–44	[illegible]	*A confident, reliable leader. Invest in your growth areas to reach the next level.*
25–34	[illegible]	[illegible]
15–24	Room to Grow	*You're developing important leadership traits. Prioritize training, mentorship, and self-reflection.*
0–14	Just Getting Started	*Everyone starts somewhere! Embrace this as an opportunity for transformational leadership growth.*

The plan for the future…

Which three traits had the lowest rating for you?

Identify one action item for each and set a goal for completion.



Thank You!



