



Age and Leadership

THE relationship of age to leadership was an important implication of the recent conference sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health and the American Psychological Association to consider the direction of further research on the psychological aspects of aging. Issues involving this relationship will acquire increasing importance as the full impact of new developments in science, education, and industry is realized. Certainly much of national policy, and perhaps of progress, is dependent on our obtaining definitive answers to a number of questions that hinge on values associated with aging and the retention of skills.

In this country a large proportion of the high executive and administrative positions are held by older men. There are, however, numerous instances of the appointment of a young man to an administrative post on the basis of his outstanding achievement, his capacity to generate fresh ideas, and his energy to put them into practice. I sometimes question the wisdom of rewarding a young man for a valuable contribution with an administrative position that demands all his attention and shortens the "doing" stage of his career. Comprehensive studies indicate that the novel and significant ideas are developed early by men who stay within one career; the later years, in contrast, seem to extend, exploit, and bring to fruition many of the earlier patterns of thought. For most men of ideas, there appears to be a progression toward maturity and leadership. If this is the case, then the shortening of the period for the kind of work in which novel ideas develop is not the ideal way to cultivate creativity.

A mature leader is generally a constructive person who has experienced the various development phases. His goals are clear, his thinking is realistic. A mature leader also recognizes the value and the difference

between his job responsibilities and those of younger workers. Hence, the working climate under such a person is generally very wholesome. He cultivates the talents of his group and, in turn, graciously accepts their support. When crises arise, they are met with a minimum amount of overreaction and contagious disturbance.

Much of the popular thinking about the deterioration of abilities with age simply does not rest on established fact. Many older workers who have maintained an active interest in a subject for many years are able to draw on an accumulation of personal knowledge and experience, which is not a part of the background of the younger worker.

Our national mental health goal is the maximum number of healthy, happy, and informed individuals of every age. It is urgent that facts about mental abilities, personality, and physical fitness be considered in defining retirement policies and in making appointments in the higher occupational levels of science, government, and industry.

Older people are often defensive about the subject of creativity and age. By encouraging objective discussion of age and leadership, we can overcome a major barrier to the development of our national maturity as well as individual maturity. Free and unhampered discussion will strengthen research in those areas of the biological and social sciences where much basic information is still lacking. Together, these may be the avenues by which more elderly people can achieve a successful old age that will mean not only greater satisfactions to the individual person but an enrichment of the country as a whole.

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