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My Journey with Peter Drucker

Frances Hesselbein

From her Pennsylvania beginnings as a volunteer Girl Scout troop leader to her rise as the CEO of the largest organization serving girls and women in the world – the Girl Scouts of the USA – Frances Hesselbein has always been mission-focused, values-based, and demographics-driven. For her transformation of the Girl Scouts in the 1970s, former president Bill Clinton awarded Frances the country’s highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. For more than 25 years, Frances has been at the helm of a very small but strong organization based in New York where she continues to train a new generation of leaders through leadership education and publications. She is chairman of the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Forum, part of the Graduate School for Public and International Affairs, Johnson Institute for Responsible Leadership at the University of Pittsburgh, and editor-in-chief of Leader to Leader. Frances is the recipient of 21 honorary doctoral degrees, the author of 3 autobiographies, and the co-editor of 30 books in 30 languages. Frances has traveled to 68 countries representing the United States, and Fortune magazine named her one of the “World’s 50 Greatest Leaders.”



We transformed the organization using his principles.

Six years after coming to New York to serve as CEO of the Girl Scouts of the USA in the late 1970s, I received a letter from John Brademus, then the chancellor of New York University, inviting me to a dinner at the University Club to hear Peter Drucker speak. I had never met Peter Drucker but had read every book he had ever written.

I knew that in such a large group I would not have an opportunity to meet him, but I would have the opportunity to hear him live – Peter Drucker, the great thought leader who had influenced the volunteers and staff in the largest organization for girls and women in the world.

The invitation read, “5:30 p.m. reception.” Now, if you grew up in western Pennsylvania, 5:30 is 5:30; so when the evening came, I arrived on time, walked into the reception room, and found myself alone with two bartenders. I turned around. Behind me was a man who had just walked in. He said, “I am Peter Drucker.” (Obviously, if you grow up in Vienna, 5:30 is 5:30.) I was so stunned that instead of saying “How do you do,” I blurted out, “Do you know how important you are to the Girl Scouts?” He said, “No, tell me.”

“If you go to any one of our 335 Girl Scout councils, you will find a shelf of your books. If you read our corporate planning and management monographs and study our management and leadership structure, you will find your philosophy,” I replied.

“You are very daring,” Peter replied. “I would be afraid to do that. Tell me, does it work?”

“Superbly well,” I told him, adding, “and I have been trying to get up enough courage to call you, and ask if I may come to Claremont and have an hour of your time?”

Peter said, “Why should both of us travel? I’ll be in New York next month, and I will give you a day of my time.”

Before we met again, Peter studied us at the council level – on the ground where the girls and leaders were – as well as our circular governance and management systems, and declared the Girl Scouts of the USA the best-managed organization in the country. “Tough, hardworking women can do anything,” he said. I wasn’t sure about tough, but hardworking, yes!

So, in 1981, the great day for our meeting arrived. The national board and staff members were in the boardroom. I am sure they expected him to comment on the results of the past five years, for these remarkable people

with their partners in local councils had transformed the organization using Drucker's principles. He stood before us and thanked us for permitting him to join us, and then he completely surprised us. "You do not see yourselves life size," he said. "You do not appreciate the significance of your work, for we live in a society that pretends to care about its children, and it does not." I wanted to rise and refute this, but could think of nothing to say. He continued, "And for a little while, you give a girl a chance to be a girl in a society that forces her to grow up all too soon."

After that first transformative day, he gave the Girls Scouts two or three days of his time each year. He studied us, talked with us, advised us, and wrote about us for the next eight years.

When I left the Girl Scouts of the USA in 1990, I bought a home in Easton, Pennsylvania, promised a publisher I would write a book on mission, and wasn't going to travel so much.

Six weeks later, I flew to Claremont, California, to brainstorm a way to permeate the nonprofit, social sector with Peter's works and philosophy. Long story short, six weeks after leaving one of the largest voluntary organizations in the world, I found myself the CEO of one of the smallest foundations in the world – the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Leadership – with no staff and no money, just a powerful vision shared with cofounders about bringing Peter to the wider world and transforming the social sector. The rest is history. Our organization's name has changed over the years, and our resources and publications are well documented on our website ([www.Hesselbein Forum.org](http://www.HesselbeinForum.org)), in our 30 books in 30 languages traveling around the world, and in our quarterly *Leader to Leader* journal. We are in our 27th year fulfilling our mission of strengthening the leadership of the social sector and their partners in business and government.

Leadership Is a Matter of How to *Be*, not How to *Do*

When I was the CEO of the Girl Scouts of the USA, I knew I had to define leadership on my own terms and in my own language, in ways that would communicate and embody the heart and the spirit of the leadership we were called to provide. After a long, difficult introspection, I developed my definition of leadership: "Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do."

All of the *how to* advice in the world won't work until *how to be* is defined, embraced by leaders, and embodied and demonstrated in every action, every communication, and every leadership moment.

The leader of today, and in the future, must be focused on how to *be* – how to develop quality, character, mindset, values, principles, and courage. The *how to be* leader knows that people are an organization's greatest asset and in word, behavior, and relationships, they demonstrate this powerful philosophy. In all interactions, from the smallest to the largest, the behavior of the *how to be* leader will demonstrate a belief in the worth and dignity of the men and women who make up the enterprise.

You and I spend most of our lives learning how to do and teaching others how to do, yet we know that, in the end, it is the quality and character of the leader that determines the performance – and the results.

How to be qualities are not baskets of skills; rather, they rise in miraculous ways to comfort, to sustain, to challenge, and to embrace. I believe passionately in the *whys*: the values, principles, and beliefs that define who we are, what we believe, what we do, and how we work with others, our fellow travelers on a shared journey to leadership in an uncertain world.

My definition of leadership defines who I am, why I do what I do, and what I believe. I test it over and over. Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do.

A Call for Leaders of the Future

Today, we need leaders who help distill Peter's concept and language of *mission*: why the organization does what it does, its purpose, its reason for being. Leaders of the future must invest in building a mission-focused, values-based, and demographics-driven organization, reflecting the many faces and cultures of our country.

We need leaders who communicate with the people and the customers of the organization and the many audiences with whom we engage – always reflecting in our communications that, "Communication is not saying something; communication is being heard."

Now, may I share a secret with you? I have two tattoos – invisible ink, of course – you can't see them, but they are there. First, Peter Drucker's

admonition to *Think first, speak last*. My second tattoo is also Peter's: *Ask, don't tell*.

We need leaders who practice the art of listening. We need leaders who use listening to include, not exclude – to build consensus, appreciate differences, and find common concepts, common language, and common ground.

We need leaders who in their own lives try to find work–life balance and make that balance a reality in the lives of those with whom they work. If you think that this is a lovely ideal, but not a realistic one in today's tough world, try comparing the productivity and morale of a workforce that is encouraged and supported in finding this rare work–life balance with those of a dispirited workforce where such balance is not a consideration, and *take no prisoners* is a valued management style.

Today, perhaps most of all, we need leaders who share successes widely while accepting responsibility for shortfalls and failures. These leaders take a tough measure of their own performance, aware that their language, behaviors, and actions are measured against their self-proclaimed values and principles.

Reflection Questions

1. Can you recall a defining moment or mentor who propelled you into your career in leadership?
2. How do you define leadership?
3. What is your mission?

