

# Spending Time with Frances Hesselbein

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**Abstract:** The following represents interviews with Frances Hesselbein in September and December of 2016.

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“Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do.”  
Frances Hesselbein

Frances Hesselbein is the President and CEO of the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Forum, positions she has held (both, one, or the other) for over 30 years. The Frances Hesselbein Leadership Forum was first known as the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management and then the Leader to Leader Institute. The journal by that same name—Leader to Leader—is an award-winning journal. In 1998 Frances was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Clinton. Darlyne has had the incredible privilege of knowing Frances and conducted interviews with her on September 9, 2016 and December 19, 2016. While we could tell you why we were eager to share her thoughts for this issue of *Reflections*, we trust that the reasons will be most clear when you hear from Frances herself:

**Darlyne: Good morning, dear Frances, and thank you again for taking the time to speak with us and our readers of this most special issue of *Reflections*. Let’s begin. Please tell us what you do, why you do what you do, and the fundamental values and beliefs undergirding your service/work.**

Frances: I have the honor and excitement of working with The Frances Hesselbein Leadership Forum, which began as the Peter Drucker Leadership Institute. We had Peter Drucker for 12 years before his passing in November of 2005. However, Peter Drucker is still alive within the Institute, with our board and staff. For us, leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do. It is the quality and character of the leader that determines the performance and result of the work: mission-focused, values-based, and demographic driven. We manage for the mission, we manage for innovation, we manage for diversity. The mission is why we do what we do, and that never changes. What we do and how we do it change, but the *why* never does.

**Darlyne: What has been your perception of social work?**

Frances: When I hear social work, I think that out there are these organizations, these remarkable people who are trying to serve. They really believe as I do that to serve is to live. Whenever there is a need, and there are massive needs all over the country, they (social workers) choose a need they want to respond to and always they are mission-focused, value-based, and demographics driven.

**Darlyne: We are intending to show our readers the relationship between the individual and organizations, bridging what we call micro and macro practice, because in academia we separate them. In most of our schools and programs, we teach our students how to work with individuals and families, or we teach our students how to work with organizations and policies. It is rare that beyond our foundational courses we teach our students how to address the needs of both ends of our client system—everyone we serve. The point of this special issue is to show that there shouldn't be this divide. Frances, has there been a time where you only worked with individuals and families and not organizations?**

Frances: Hmm...No. Long ago in the basement of the Presbyterian Church were the members of Girl Scout Troop 17. There were 30 girls, 10 years old, and most of their fathers worked in the nearby coal mines, steel mills, etc. They were the most remarkable 10-year-olds, and an aggressive woman Girl Scout neighborhood chairman kept trying to get me to take the Girl Scout troop. I would reply that, "I know nothing about little girls...I am a mother of an 8-year-old boy." One day the woman said they would have to disband the troop because the leader was going to Australia to become a missionary. She told me that they will have to say goodbye to the 30 10-year-old Girl Scouts. So I agreed to take the troop for six weeks until they could find a new leader. Troop 17 and I stayed together until all the girls graduated from high school and these girls sold more cookies than anyone had ever heard of.

The girls raised all that money, and they then had to plan what they wanted to do with it. They said, "We already have the plan. We're going to New York City on the train (Pennsylvania Railroad). What we want to do is visit the Museum of Natural History to see the dinosaurs." They described the other museums and where they wanted to go. One wanted to ride the subway, another the ferry. Exciting how they had already planned how they would use the money!

Later I became the CEO of the Girl Scouts Council. One day, I got a call from the Girl Scouts of USA saying: We want you to come to talk to us about the National Executive Director-CEO job which apparently had been open for several months.

**Darlyne: And that segues perfectly into the second part of our question: How did you move from Troop 17 to work with larger organizations?**

Frances: In this call from the New York National Headquarters of the Girl Scouts they said that I had done some wonderfully innovative things, and they asked me to come to NY and talk to them about the national CEO job. I told my husband John (who was a journalist) about the call and he said, "I'm driving you to NY. You have to speak with them." He was also a film maker and always wanted to live in NY. And then he said "Good manners would indicate that you at least speak with them"—that was my final encouragement!

So I went to the New York Girl Scout national headquarters and sat down with 6 lovely people, the search committee. They observed that I was not asking questions as if I wanted the job. I was being nice and polite. One said, "Frances, if you were in this job, what would you do?" Well, here's the largest organization for girls and women in the whole world, and I would never take the job, but I could be honest about how I saw the future. So I spoke about transformation:

throwing out the old handbooks filled with camping and cooking and having some great authors write new handbooks, heavy on math, science, and technology. I was very positive about the organization and its future.

**Darlyne: Why did you pick that (math, science, and technology) Frances?**

Frances: Because it wasn't happening for girls and women, and here was the opportunity to open new doors to a wider world. So I described for them the total transformation of the organization. I said I would also speak with friends at the Harvard Business School and ask them to design a five-day leadership training session for our local Girl Scout executive directors. They would have the Harvard Business School experience. We also would find new authors to develop contemporary handbooks for girls.

**Darlyne: What was that year?**

Frances: I began in 1976 and was there for over 13 years, for 5,000 days. Because in the job interview I had described the total transformation, they had bought it and it became theirs. And we then began getting prizes for multicultural materials for girls and young women.

**Darlyne: As was the case with math, science, and technology, it was very much ahead of your time to even talk about multiculturalism, Frances! What gave you that drive?**

Frances: My experience in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. I lived there and I was the first woman in the USA to chair a United Way campaign, and people said, "What? A woman? They (women) had never been involved before, and we will have to ask Bethlehem Steel Co." But how did I begin with reaching out to people? John and I were the first White people in our city to become members of the NAACP. We each paid our ten dollar membership. Our action surprised some people, but many followed us. And then John had a call from the Governor of Pennsylvania who said, "I want you to be my representative for equal opportunity, and I want you to carry my message." And the first thing John was called to do was to visit a barber who refused to cut Black people's hair. The barber said, "I can't cut their hair. I don't have the tools." "Well, you'll have to buy the tools," said John. Then Father Saylor, John's partner in this Governor's initiative, said to John, "I'm sorry [but] your management team must also reflect diversity." Father Saylor then called on the steel company, to discuss the challenge of having eight senior managers, same position, all White. And then that changed! It was very inspiring in those days when equal rights was not a very popular concept. I always loved to see these two young men doing what the governor wanted them to do.

Within the Girl Scouts, we had a similar, yet our own wonderful, battle cry. We asked, "When they, [anyone outside] look at us, can they find themselves?" The answer has to be the same for our [own] management team, the board, and in our films and journals, as it is out in the field: "Yes." Very soon we had a diverse team, for thirteen years.

**Darlyne: So far in your life you've always focused on the individual in the context of the community. You've never just looked at an individual and not also looked at the context.**

**And yet, you've never ignored the individual. You've always bridged what we would call the micro-macro divide. Why have you done this?**

Frances: You have to have respect. It all begins with respect for all people and their communities. We must reach out not just to everyone who looks like us or who thinks the way we think. We must work with and right across their remarkable community, and we make sure that when they look at us, they can find themselves.

In girl scouting, we threw out the old handbooks and we found four remarkable authors and artists who were going to do this for us. I said to them, "Remember, when any girl or young woman opens her own handbook she must be able to find herself". They asked, "Did you say any?" I responded, "I should have said *every*." If I'm 7 years old and I'm an Eskimo Brownie, when I open my handbook, I can find myself.

They caught on fire! The new handbooks had the most powerful illustrations of girls of all races, and we started getting prizes for best multicultural resources. It was fun. And there was no push-back.

**Darlyne: You left Troop 17 and Johnstown, PA to work with Girl Scouts of the USA and then Peter Drucker. Can you tell us the story of how Peter Drucker got you involved in the Peter Drucker Leadership Institute. How did he approach you when he asked you to work with him and how long ago did this happen?**

Frances: 1990. Two friends and I met Peter Drucker. I had just left the Girl Scouts the day before, and two girls came to talk about what I am going to do. They also asked me, "How do we move Peter Drucker across the country and around the world?" So we met together, discussed it, and decided to organize a new Peter Drucker Leadership Institute. I thought I had agreed to be the chairman, but when we brought our idea to Peter, he said, "You will not be the chair, you will be the CEO and run it, or it won't work." So, I found myself the President and CEO of the smallest organization in the world. That was 30 years ago. To the staff, in our minds, we are still the Peter Drucker Leadership Institute even though it now bears my name.

**Darlyne: Let's fast forward to now: What are you doing now? What are you doing with your time, Frances, and why?**

Frances: Today the needs are greater than ever before for leaders. The challenges are greater. So, since 2012 I have traveled, spoken, and developed our global webinars. Recently, I spoke in a global webinar with 400 women in 40 countries and it was called, "Leaders of the Future, Women in Action." On this webinar there were also 80 young men in China and Hong Kong who had just received their MBAs. They developed 15 questions for something they called, "Leadership Development by Cell Phone." It was theirs. I held my cell phone in my office. They were all in China and Hong Kong, holding their cell phones.

Their 15 questions were all profound. I had them in front of me. My friend, Henry To would speak into his cell phone—"Ms. Hesselbein, question #1..."—and I would hold my cell phone in

front of my face and would respond. After question #5, I hear this [other] young man's voice without a trace of accent. He lived, grew up, and was born in Hong Kong or China. His English was flawless. "Mrs. Hesselbein, would you mind amplifying that last answer? We want to know more about this." I said, "Of course I can." So after 43 minutes, a [another] lovely young man's voice came on—flawless English. "In two minutes, our 45 minutes with you will be over. Would it be possible for you to give us 45 more minutes?" I said, "Of course I can." And we continued with their profound questions for 45 more minutes.

We never ever charge for our webinars. We want the poorest leaders in the poorest countries to join us; we check to see if anyone else has signed on. We have had all of these big corporations. We have had IBM, General Electric (GE), General Motors (GM), some large universities, etc. We didn't realize when we opened it up that people [were] hungry for leadership adventures in learning, so that's one of the things we provide.

Right now I am raising 4 x \$65,000 for a quarterly global webinar. Of course it will be open to everyone, and there will never be a fee. For our first one, a webinar for women, I received an email from the poorest, smallest African country. "Dear Lady Hesselbein: We are not women. We are men who are leaders, and we are so hungry for your message. Even though we are not ladies, may we please register?" I emailed them three minutes later and invited them to register, welcomed them and said, "You are very welcome." There is no fee, and gentleman, if you know other leaders who are men in Africa, tell them how welcome they would be, and there is no fee." So we had a marvelous webinar for women and included all these men who wanted to be part of it.

**Darlyne: Frances, what's the secret sauce to you opening your eyes everyday and having these kinds of conversations, like this one with us today?**

Frances: "To serve is to live," is my battle cry. Every day when we get up, it's a great day, it's a gift. And we think, how can I make a difference? What can I do that would help someone? What can we do in our small organization? Where can we be so that tonight when we ask ourselves, "Did I do anything that made a difference today?" we hope we can say, "You bet I did!" We always make sure we use the language of the future, not the language of the past.

### **Conclusion**

Now some of you may ask, why Frances? And the researchers among us would say that she is part of a convenience sample. Yes, I have served with Frances on her boards, but I'm also on other boards, serving with other people: So why her? Frances is one of the most tenacious activists for individual leadership development, particularly for women, that I know. As Peter Drucker is known to have said "The early militant feminists declared that God was a woman. It didn't surprise me one bit because there was my 4th grade teacher and there was Frances Hesselbein."

Even with this, never once have I heard Frances talk only about the individual. Frances always looks at the individual as well as the systems with which that person is connected—families,

organizations, and communities. While that requires a ‘wide angle lens’ for Frances, I have never heard her refer to what she does as *work*.

In short, Frances Hesselbein is an exemplar for how to best bridge our micro-macro divide, embodying our professional values, and living her life, her personal mission, right out loud! Melissa and I wanted to give our *Reflections* readers the opportunity to hear even a little from this truly incredible woman, a leader herself, a living legend.

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