

In memoriam: Frances Hesselbein

Frances Hesselbein, who passed away at the age of 107 in 2022, was one of the last of a generation of influential thought leaders, such as Peter Drucker, who created much of what we know as great leadership today. *Strategy & Leadership* was honored to have her as a member of the Editorial Board starting a number of decades ago when the publication was named *Planning Review*. Though she did not participate in editorial decisions, having her on the EB helped us recruit a number of prominent women strategists as authors and board members. One of them, Rita McGrath, professor of management at the Columbia University Business School and the author of *Seeing Around Corners: How to spot inflection points in business before they happen*,^[1] recently wrote an homage to Mrs. Hesselbein that she has graciously allowed me to quote extensively here.

Career highlights

Mrs. Hesselbein grew up in Johnstown, PA, a town well known for the disastrous 1889 Johnstown flood. A homemaker with no notable experience in leadership, she was asked to take over a local Girl Scouts troop whose leader was departing, and as there weren't any other candidates, she agreed to take on the troop for six months. She prepared herself by reading Girl Scout history and found inspiration in founder Juliette Low, who told girls in 1912 that they could "be anything they wanted to be."

Her leadership style, guiding and supporting rather than telling people what to do, began to consolidate in those early days. She was energized by the troop she led, sticking with them until they went to high school, by which time Mrs. Hesselbein had set her sights on bigger targets.

As Chair of the Regional Council of the Girl Scouts, she introduced wave after wave of innovations, including enlisting both local business and union leaders in supporting her efforts – the kind of networking among potential opponents that became a hallmark of her leadership style. Her adoption of the management principles of Peter Drucker began then, as she assigned his 1967 book *The Effective Executive*^[2] to every member of her staff, declaring that these were exactly the behaviors they needed to practice.

By 1976, with a proven track record of accomplishment, she felt confident enough to apply for the position of National Executive Director of the Girl Scouts of America. Her pitch to the selection committee was that the Scouts required nothing short of a revolution. Families with stay-at-home mothers were becoming less the norm; attention was starting to be paid to opportunities for girls from diverse backgrounds and the Girl Scouts were at risk of becoming irrelevant. She never expected to be hired, so was free with her controversial opinions!

She got the job and began what would become a transformation for the ages. She commissioned studies, rethought the traditional curriculum of the Scouts and moved it away from the domestic spheres to more career-oriented learning, such as science and math. She also dismantled the formal hierarchical structure that had characterized Girl Scout leadership, replacing the rigid hierarchies with what she called "webs of inclusion."

She was CEO of the Girl Scouts of the USA from 1976-1990. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998 for her leadership of the scouts and service as "a pioneer for women, volunteerism, diversity and opportunity."

“Leadership is much less about what you do, and much more about who you are. If you view leadership as a bag of manipulative tricks or charismatic behaviors to advance your own personal interests, then people have every right to be cynical. But if your leadership flows first and foremost from inner character and integrity of ambition, then you can justly ask people to lend themselves to your organization and its mission.” – Frances Hesselbein

She actually met Peter Drucker in person for the first time in 1981, at a speech he was giving at the Union Club in New York. As she recounted the encounter, “I arrived at exactly 5:30 because that was the time on the invitation. I grew up in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, where 5:30 means 5:30. But when I walked in, it was just me and two bartenders. Then I heard a deep voice behind me saying, ‘I am Peter Drucker.’ Apparently 5:30 means 5:30 in Vienna too. We were the only ones there.”

She was so surprised, she recalled, that “I forgot my manners and just blurted out, ‘Do you know how important you are to the Girl Scouts?’ I said that if he read any of our planning or strategy papers or looked at our management structure, he would find we reflected his philosophy.” That encounter formed the basis for a relationship that lasted until Drucker’s death in 2005. His encouragement that the Girl Scouts were doing important societal work proved fundamental to the ambitious transformation she launched.

You would think after all that, retiring in her 70’s, that she would be done. But fate had other plans for her. Partnering with Peter Drucker and with other supporters, they launched the highly influential Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management. It was renamed the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Institute after his death in 2005, and she continued to serve in a leadership role. Mrs. Hesselbein also wrote and edited several books, including *Hesselbein on Leadership* (2002)[3] and *My Life in Leadership* (2011).[4]

Projects

Professor McGrath concludes: “Apparently, it was impossible not to be near Frances without getting roped into one or another special project. One that I worked on personally was a book called *Work is Love Made Visible*.[5] Co-edited by Frances, Marshall Goldsmith and Sarah McArthur, the book is a collection of essays by a number of pre-eminent thought leaders deliberately focused on their more private journeys toward finding their purpose and the unique ways they might add value in the world.”

We have lost a shining example of wonderful leadership and are thankful for the legacy she has left us. – Rita McGrath

Notes

1. *Seeing Around Corners: How to spot inflection points in business before they happen*, Rita McGrath, (Harper Business, 2019).
2. *The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done*, Peter Drucker, (1966).
3. *Hesselbein on Leadership*, Frances Hesselbein (2002), now available from Jossey-Bass (2013).
4. *My Life in Leadership: The Journey and Lessons Learned Along the Way*, Frances Hesselbein, (Jossey-Bass, 2011).
5. *Work is Love Made Visible*, co-edited by Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith and Sarah McArthur (Wiley; 2018).