



"WE ARE CALLED TO LEAD."

A CONVERSATION WITH  
*Frances Hesselbein*  
*Frances Hesselbein challenges our beliefs about leadership.*

BY JILL MUEHRCKE

**R**ECENTLY I SHARED LUNCH AND conversation with Frances Hesselbein, an expert on leadership in all three sectors—but especially the nonprofit sector. President and CEO of the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management, she is also board chair of the Josephson Institute for the Advancement of Ethics and served as CEO of Girl Scouts USA from 1976 to 1990. She is editor-in-chief of the quarterly journal *Leader to Leader* and co-editor of *The Leader of the Future*, *The Organization of the Future* and the soon-to-be-published *The Community of the Future*. The hours I spent with this creative thinker put many things into new perspective for me, and I am pleased to share her insights with you.

**Q: What's the biggest mistake you see nonprofit leaders making today?**

**A:** Not preparing for the future. Not understanding how different the future will be. I wouldn't call it a mistake but an area to be strengthened. Many nonprofit managers and leaders—and I use the terms interchangeably, because all nonprofit managers are also leaders—aren't ready for the dramatic changes that are transforming our world.

**Q: What are these dramatic changes you see coming?**

A: For one thing, the day of the partnership is upon us. Wringing our hands over getting a smaller slice of the old pie gets us nowhere. We must be aggressive in attracting the partnerships we need. Leaders must put the same energy into building partnerships as they put into building their organizations.

Nonprofit organizations must collaborate within their sector *and* outside their sector. It's the only way to give people the services they need and deserve. Alone, corporations can't do it. Alone, government can't do it. And the social sector—as Peter Drucker calls the nonprofit sector—certainly can't do it alone. Building partnerships within the sectors and between the sectors is the answer, and it will become even more critical in the future.

Nonprofit leaders must also build partnerships within their own organizations. They need to create a leadership team, made up of board and staff. The board and staff must be in a true partnership.

This partnership between board and staff is key. The CEO is not a subordinate but a colleague of the board. They must see each other as equal partners. There must be mutual respect and understanding between them. When this relationship is functional, the organization is functional. If it's not functional, the organization is in trouble.

**Q: And what if a board or staff member suspects that such a dysfunctional relationship exists? How can they get back on track?**

A: The board and staff should discuss, as partners, what went wrong. They should ask, "Are we focusing on our mission statement? Is our mission still relevant?"

The place to start is always with the mission. Peter Drucker says your mission should fit on a T-shirt. It should be a short, clear description of why you do what you do. Once you understand your mission, you can place it in a strategic context.

**Q: How do we place ourselves and our missions in a strategic context?**

A: By scanning our environment and defining reality. When you do that, you can see how your mission fits into the larger environment.

Defining reality is critical to success. Max DePree said, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. And in between, the leader is a servant."

**Q: What other dramatic changes do you see transforming the way we do business in the nonprofit sector?**

A: We are called to lead in very different ways than ever before. We need to see leadership in terms of attributes, not skills. I define leadership as "how to

be," not "how to do it." Leaders lead by example.

I'm drawn to leaders who see the organization as its people and not its things. We must take people out of the old top-down management structure and into fluid, circular systems that free the human spirit.

Our job is to help people make their strengths effective and their weaknesses irrelevant. We must watch that we're not spending our time trying to shore up people's weaknesses rather than helping them build on their strengths.

Society's greatest need is effective, ethical leaders in all three sectors—not *the* leader, not *a* leader, but many leaders.

I like what Arthur Ashe had to say:

**To achieve greatness  
Start where you are  
Use what you have  
Do what you can.**

Everyone in the organization is a leader, and we can all make change happen—starting where we are, using what we have, doing what we can.

**Q: As a writer and editor, what do you think about the power of language? Are the words we use important?**

A: Yes. Our power as leaders lies in the words we use and the example we set. Nonprofit leaders must have a few powerful messages, and they must beam these over and over. These messages are: vision, mission, future, values.

Outstanding leaders choose their words very carefully. They use language that's inclusive; it embraces. When Max DePree says, "A good leader is vulnerable to the talents of others," that's a new kind of language. *Vulnerable* is a new word to use in conjunction with leader. It signifies an important shift in our idea of what leadership is.

**What Is Our Business?  
Who Is Our Customer?  
What Does the Customer  
Consider Value?**

The Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management's mission is to lead social sector organizations toward excellence in performance. The Drucker Foundation provides educational conferences, publications, resources, and awards that help social sector organizations and their leaders. (For a review of one of their books, see page 53). The Foundation brings together leaders from, and strengthens partnerships and alliances among, the public, private, and social sectors. For more information, contact the Foundation at 320 Park Avenue, 3rd Floor, New York, New York 10022-6839 (phone 212-224-1174, fax 212-224-2508, e-mail info@pfd.org, web site www.pfd.org).

## Are You a Leader of the Future?

1. **DO YOU USE** teams and partnerships within your organization?
2. **DO YOU CREATE** partnerships with corporations, government, and other nonprofits?
3. **DO YOU SEE** your purpose *not* as directing people but as helping them achieve their goals?
4. **ARE YOU COMMITTED** to a diverse work force in which people's differences are prized?
5. **DO YOU HARNESS** the best of technology to serve your organization's mission?
6. **DO YOU REWARD** innovation?
7. **DO YOU PROVIDE** flexible work arrangements?
8. **DO YOU KEEP** your organization's structure flexible and fluid?
9. **DOES YOUR LIFE** serve as an example of commitment and credibility? Do you do what you say you will do? Do you practice what you preach?
10. **DO YOU BELIEVE** in people? Do you help liberate the leader in everyone with whom you work?
11. **ARE YOU CAREFUL** about the language you use and the way you communicate? Do you constantly communicate mission, vision, and values?
12. **ARE YOU WELL TUNED** to the environment so that you can adapt quickly to changes?
13. **DO YOU VIEW YOURSELF** as a broker between your organization and the larger community, bringing together partners from all three sectors to solve community problems?
14. **DO YOU LIVE** your organization's mission?
15. **DO YOU CREATE** an atmosphere in which many leaders can emerge?

Another example occurred when I asked Lewis Platt, head of Hewlett-Packard, to write a chapter for the book *The Organization of the Future*. You would expect him to write about running a high-tech organization. Instead, he focused on how leaders must help employees balance their work and home lives. He wrote about the importance of providing flexible hours, child care and elder care, and a supportive environment that values people's individuality and diversity.

That's what I mean about a new language. It's heartening to hear such a great corporate leader use words like balance and diversity to describe the organization of the future.

It's interesting to note that the language of leadership is the same across all three sectors. I don't change my language when I speak to Texaco or GE and when I speak to nonprofit organizations. Leadership is leadership. If we think we have to "water down" leadership principles to make them palatable for the nonprofit sector, that's terrible.

I use these words to describe what I believe an organization should be: mission-focused, values-based, demographics-driven. That's an important message.

### ***Q: What steps would you suggest for readers whose goal is to lead a successful nonprofit organization?***

**A:** First, be sure your own house is in order. Set aside some part of your schedule for your personal growth. Create a plan for your development. It should be a written plan, not just one in your head. It should focus on your strengths and build on them. Begin learning all you can about team-building, and become as skillful a team member as you possibly can. See lifelong learning and daily learning as an indispensable part of your life.

Next, look within your organization. Be sure you

and your board have a strong, equal partnership. Be sure your board is playing its rightful role in strategic planning and in sloughing off old policies that have no relevance now.

Reflect on your organization's mission. Understand the power of mission focus. Make that power palpable in your own sphere, and help others mobilize around your mission. Be very sure you are providing leadership development opportunities for all board and staff. And begin building partnerships, both in and outside the nonprofit sector.

### ***Q: What's the best way to choose such a partner?***

**A:** Start by identifying the critical issues that your organization addresses. Then pick a partner that can help you meet that challenge. Consider corporations, government, and other nonprofits as potential partners. I believe that the greatest strength comes when a nonprofit organization reaches out to a corporation or agency and describes a need in the community. When a team of people from the corporation comes together with a team from the nonprofit organization, united in their passion for a cause, they all have an opportunity to accomplish something they could not possibly do alone.

Companies are more open than ever before to the idea of collaborating with nonprofits, because they know that the old answers no longer fit. Just look at your organization's innovative project, and find your partner.

### ***Q: Why do you think so many nonprofits resist the idea of partnerships?***

**A:** I think they fear they'll be overwhelmed by a larger partner. But they need to understand that the size of

the partners is not what matters. What matters is a sense of purpose, the willingness to be a partner.

We must understand that we don't lose a thing when we enter a partnership. The Drucker Foundation is a small organization, and we've entered into partnerships with some very big corporations—GE, Texaco, Hewlett-Packard. We haven't been overwhelmed, and we haven't lost anything. It has been an exuberant experience. We've experienced a synergy that none of us could create alone.

**Q: How do you find the time—and energy—for all the things you do?**

A: It's a constant struggle. I concentrate on keeping a balance between work and life. I swim every chance I get, and I exercise every morning. That gives me the energy I need.

I get enormous energy and fulfillment from other people in all my circles. My family is very important. I have a great cheering section. The people I care about and who care about me give me a great sense of security and place. I couldn't do what I do if I didn't have that support in my life.

Right now, it's a very exuberant time for the Drucker Foundation. I'm traveling way too much—last year I worked overseas nine times and criss-crossed this country many, many times—but when doors open, you have to seize the opportunity. I'm fortunate that I travel easily. On long flights, I do some of my best thinking.

I don't think about the travel; I think about the people like you who are going to be at the end of the journey.

Life is to be lived. If it stops being exhilarating, I'll quit doing it.

**Q: How can other nonprofit leaders avoid burnout?**

A: I don't agree with the usual definition of burnout. I don't think burnout comes from working too long or having too heavy a work load. Burnout is more a result of frustration. We get burned out when we see what we want to achieve but aren't able to achieve it. If you love what you do and are passionate about your mission, you can accomplish far more without feeling overworked than someone who is frustrated in what they're doing. The difference is the freedom to express yourself in your work. When we unleash people to use their full selves in their work, there is no more burnout.

**Q: How do you see technology's role in leading nonprofits?**

A: I see it as an indispensable tool. As leaders, we must use every piece of new technology that will enhance our organizations' missions. But it's not a substitute for

the human spirit.

**Q: Everything you say sounds wonderful, but is it realistic for small nonprofits to make the changes you talk about?**

A: Yes, if they move beyond their own walls. That's where *Nonprofit World* is so useful. It helps break down walls and gives us a wider view. Its articles focus on the common threads that run through everything we do.

The Society's motto "Advancement through Sharing" says it all. It sums up everything we've been talking about. The way the Society has formed partnerships among all three sectors to create the Learning Institute is a great example for other nonprofits to follow. Such collaborations are the way it has to be.

*Nonprofit World* is valuable in another way, too. It helps nonprofits see themselves life-sized. When nonprofits fear collaboration and partnerships, it's because they see themselves as smaller and less significant than they really are. They tend to downplay their importance and underestimate the huge contributions they can make. *Nonprofit World* shines a light on the worth of every nonprofit organization, no matter how small.

As nonprofits, we can and should be equal partners with government and corporate America. We are a critical part of our society, and we are called to lead. ■

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These books are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. Society members receive discounts on all resources. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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