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Answering the Important Questions

Frances Hesselbein

President of the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Institute



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Frances Hesselbein, founding President of the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Institute, formerly known as the Peter Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management, joins Jack Zenger in this installment of the Zenger Folkman Leadership Podcast series. They discuss *The Five Most Important Questions: Enduring Wisdom for Today's Leaders*, which she co-authored with Peter Drucker and Joan Snyder Kuhl.

Frances served as CEO of the Girl Scouts of the USA and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Bill Clinton. She is the author of many books, including *My Life in Leadership*, *Hesselbein on Leadership*, and *More Hesselbein on Leadership*. She is the co-editor of numerous books, including *Be, Know, Do: Leadership the Army Way* and is the Editor-in-Chief of the award-winning journal, *Leader to Leader*.

Peter Drucker once remarked that Frances was the most effective executive with whom he had ever worked.

You can view the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Institute website at www.hesselbeininstitute.org.

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What prompted you to co-author the book *The Five Most Important Questions* posthumously, with Peter Drucker?

I didn't write the book; Peter Drucker wrote the five questions. I believe that our job is to move Peter Drucker's philosophies across the country and around the world.

Peter wrote his famous three questions:

1. What is our mission?
2. Who is the customer?
3. What does the customer value?

After we spent a lot of money making a gorgeous brochure, Peter said, "Oh, no! There are five questions."

4. What are your results?
5. What is your plan?

If you don't end up with a plan, and I'm quoting Peter, "A good time was had by all, but that is all."

These questions are as powerful and essential today as they were the first day Peter Drucker asked leaders in all three sectors these questions.

Peter said that self-assessment is the first action required of leadership. In your view, how accurate did he find that self-assessment?



If we continue reading Peter’s work and what people have written about him, we would know that self-assessment is even more essential today than it was when Peter was still with us.

We ask the questions of ourselves, we answer them, and then we study what our response has been. We have to be very critical, and I mean this in a very positive way. We don’t say, “Well, I’m working so hard and everything is going so well.” That is not self-assessment. Self-assessment is asking those critical questions.

The book addresses leading in the public, private, and social sectors. Have you found any difference in the skills and abilities required for leaders in one sector versus another?

The basic principles are the same, but the customer might be different. Peter always said about people who had a mission statement that took up a third of a page that it should fit on a t-shirt, and unless you are using the back of the shirt, you’re talking about five or seven words.

Sometimes it is very hard for leaders to actually get to the point where they really know what the customer values rather than thinking they know what is good for the customer.

After we ask and understand the answers to the first three questions, we don’t stop there. We then ask what have been the results and we have to be very tough with ourselves. Part of this might make you feel pretty good and you might discover a couple of areas where you haven’t paid enough attention or made great enough advancements.

We ask all five questions. The last two are important. What are the results? And what is our plan?



As people move up the ladder in organizations and become the most senior executives, do they often lose touch with what the customer really wants?

The ones who do not succeed do lose touch, especially the ones who think they know what is good for the customer.

Also, moving up the ladder is part of the old, hierarchical language that we are throwing out: up, down; top, bottom; superior, subordinate. That's the language of the past. We now move across the organization.

In your experience, is there one question that is more difficult for leadership teams to answer than the others?

Yes! It is hard enough to answer, "What are our results?" with a short, powerful response, but the toughest part is to answer, "What is our plan?" You must have a plan to take action.

Many people who read this book would see it from the perspective of the organization. I'm sure a lot of readers would come at it with a more personal view—how they personally fit within the organization. What advice would you give leaders who are trying to map their strengths and abilities to the needs of the organization?

This is one of the most exciting parts of leadership development. It's not about you. It's about them. It's about the organization.



You must look at your own strengths and where you are going to make the greatest difference. You might see one area where you are not comfortable. This is healthy because learning, growing, and strengthening areas that might not be as strong as you would want them to be is vital.

Learning and growing is part of every leader's life and development, whether you are the CEO or you are the newest manager.

Peter once said that the task of the organization is to help people leverage their strengths and to make their weaknesses irrelevant. Was Peter the forerunner of the strengths movement?

Yes, he was. Peter always said to focus on your strengths, not on areas that need to be strengthened, because you will take care of those.

This is a very exciting time that differentiates the leaders of the future from the leaders of the present or even the leaders of the past.

Do you have any advice about how leaders can periodically assess or measure their personal progress and what they can do to continue their personal development?

Leaders who are part of the present and the future should have learning opportunities at every level. We need to look at where we think we are and at the areas to be strengthened. We need to plan our own growth and development.

Emerson wrote, "Be ye an opener of doors." We need to take that advice very seriously. We not only open the doors for learning, development, growth, and excitement for the future for ourselves, but for people who report to us—people who are part of our teams. We must open those doors for them.



We need to learn every day. Massive change is taking place all over the world. What do we have to do to be part of the future? One thing we have to do is provide learning opportunities for our people.

Last Thursday 20 people that are managers in a remarkably successful life insurance company were in a four-day leadership development class. I was invited to spend 45 minutes discussing leadership and management. Every one of those men and women has an impressive title. All of them have graduate degrees. All of them are very smart or they wouldn't be in their positions. This company believes that all of its leaders should have periodic learning and growing experiences. This company is an example of how to keep your managerial force alive, well, growing, and learning.

I'm going to put you on the spot with one last question. How do you want to be remembered?

I would like to be remembered in this way: "Frances always said, 'To serve is to live.'" I would like to spend the rest of my life serving in many ways and helping people who need the most help.

Right now, in New York City, one of the richest cities in the world, many children are not in school. If you are not in school, have no high school diploma, and no job, you have no future. I'm trying to help educate our young people.

The education of all of our people is one of the most critical issues today.



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