

## Women Entrepreneur

### Guest Blogger

On the ground with women entrepreneurs

## WPO Conference: 90+ Guru & Salsa Dancing, Too

By: Hilary Kaye | 04/27/2010

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Midway through the WPO annual [conference](#), our Friday lunch program turned out to be a very special duo who conversed on stage like old friends. In fact, they are old friends. In further fact, they act like each other's BFF. The audience was treated to an amazing exchange of reminiscences, storytelling and laughter. This pair have known each other since 1982 and have absolute respect for each other. Who are they? Frances Hesselbein and Marshall Goldsmith. And it was pure gold.

I confess I was not aware of Frances Hesselbein before the conference, although everyone else in the room seemed to be. I can't begin to list her credentials. But perhaps to set the stage, I should mention that she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998 (the nation's highest civilian honor); she is the founding director and now CEO of the Drucker Foundation (now called Leader to Leader Institute); she was CEO of the Girl Scouts during 13 pivotal [years](#); and now, instead of retiring, she is working with cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at [West Point](#). Did I mention that she is well into her 90s?

Very simply, age is not an issue. Sharp as a tack, friendly and charming during several brief chats with me, Frances Hesselbein boggles the mind. So much so that I was not the least bit surprised when she joined our closing [salsa](#) dancing session on Saturday. Twirling a yellow scarf as part of the same "yellow salsa dance troupe" I was in, Hesselbein struggled to learn the salsa steps just like the rest of us were struggling to keep up with the fast-paced Latin rhythm. Oh yeah, she was unlike any nonagenarian I have ever met.

[Marshall Goldsmith](#), Hesselbein's lunchtime conversation companion--and BFF--also has too many credentials to list. He's a best-selling author and executive coach. His just-released book, *Mojo*, is already a [New York Times](#) best-seller, and he generously gave a copy to the entire WPO audience. As Hesselbein and Goldsmith chatted, reminisced and laughed, the WPO audience sat transfixed. Something very special was taking place onstage.

Hesselbein then fielded questions from the audience, providing memorable responses, including a story about her grandmother, which she recalled with clarity and emotion, when asked who her role model was growing up.

A couple of comments come to mind when thinking about the luncheon conversation:

"We manage people in a world that is round, why should we put people in little boxes?" This was her explanation of how and why she put together a flexible, fluid management system that has been tremendously successful for her and the organizations she has led, including the Girl Scouts' turnaround she piloted.

Asked for her recommendations for the gathering of WPO women, Hesselbein suggested that "personal humility, total respect and trust" are the key elements to aspire to. She pointed out that we are living in a difficult time, with the lowest level of trust and highest level of cynicism. But she suggested that people not become discouraged and instead become part of the solution.

When Goldsmith pointed out that he has always known Hesselbein to be optimistic and upbeat, Hesselbein acknowledged these are her personality traits. But she added that she, indeed, has known sorrow and tragedy. "We all have sorrows, but you have to see them as opportunities."

By the end of [lunch](#), I felt like I had climbed a mountaintop and was sitting at the feet of an honest-to-goodness guru who had figured out the mysteries of life. Several days later, I realized I wished I had asked Hesselbein something I'm sure every woman in the audience wanted to know: how she was able to look, sound and act several decades younger than her chronological age. If I ever find out, I'll let you all know.