

## LEADERS in Action

## Frances Hesselbein interviews JASON WOMACK



**Jason Womack is an executive coach, author and expert speaker focusing on the psychology, sociology and technology of productivity. He has worked with leaders for almost two decades in both business and education sectors. His extensive background is in leadership education, curriculum design, program implementation, policy research and development of partnerships.**

## Q&amp;A

**Frances Hesselbein:** *Jason, I believe you are one of the great thought leaders of our time. During many meetings with Peter Drucker, I heard him say, “I just look out the window and see what’s visible, but not yet seen.” When you look out the window, what do you see?*

**Jason Womack:** Frances, as you’ve mentored me, I’ve heard you say, “In today’s world and in our own country, we have the lowest level of trust, and the highest level of cynicism and we seem to have forgotten civil discourse in a civil society.” What do I see? I see many people wondering who is going to make things better while simultaneously I see that a few leaders are stepping into the spotlight and that is making “all the difference in our world.”

**FH:** *Do you have a simple way to think about how leaders get better? How they seek continual improvement? Tell us what you do, to be a better leader.*

**JW:** For any project I participate in, I ask, “Why?” I want to understand — on the deepest of levels — the “So that…” at the foundation of the endeavor.

**FH:** *What Was Your Defining Moment As a Leader?*

**JW:** As a high school teacher, I worked tirelessly to connect with my students and their parents. I regularly planned parent, teacher, student conferences before and after school. During one conference long ago, I learned a critical lesson. I was meeting with a father and his son who was struggling in class. At one point during our conversation, the father turned to his son and said, “Why are you always getting into trouble?”

The boy hung his head, avoided eye contact and answered, “The only time anyone notices me is when I do something wrong.” That moment in time changed me. I understood just how fundamental the human need for belonging is; even if it expressed itself as attention getting behavior.

**Continued**

## Q&amp;A with Jason Womack

Jason says leadership is about more than just getting other people to follow; anyone with a loud voice could do that.

In this interview, Jason reveals his belief that values-based leadership means that you make and keep promises, building a strong foundation of belief and trust for emerging leaders around you.

I reflect back on that conversation often when I'm working with people today. I know that they will grow and prosper when they feel acknowledged and know that they belong.

**FH:** *What will leaders increasingly need to include that up until now they may not have had to study in great detail?*

**JW:** As an advisor to managers and founders of companies around the world, I continue to observe the need for teams to be able to collaborate across cultures and between functions.

Over the next twenty years, it's going to be more important that these leaders embrace not just integration but what I call "Cross Functional Imagination." I believe a mark of an effective executive is her or his ability to image-in the variables and the unknowns that are only beginning to become clear.

A mentor of mine reminds me, "You'll see into the future much more clearly when you do your homework and you use your creative imagination to wonder how it can be." In the future, leaders must incorporate much more creative and cross functional scenario planning into their strategy.

**FH:** *What are some of your own habits or routines as an effective leader?*

**JW:** At the end of each day, I have what I call my Triple A process. In a notebook on my nightstand, I write a paragraph or two about the past fifteen - eighteen hours.

I write about 3 themes:

- Accomplishment (what did we finish today?)
- Acknowledgement (who made a significant, positive difference today?)
- Appreciation (what am I incredibly grateful for?)

The next morning, I will read and reflect on these notes, which helps set the next day in motion.

Oh, and another habit: I write 3-5 "thank you" cards each week. For the past 17 years, I have focused on finding someone to be grateful to each day. I stop, write a note, and put in the mail. I call this my "gratitude meditation" and find it calms my mind and gets me to place of service.

**FH:** *How do you listen — and what do you listen for — so you hear more than what is just being said by those you lead?*

**JW:** First, I feel it's important to consider the whole person: where are they from, what do they like, how do they interact with their world? Knowing answers to these kinds of questions gives me a point of reference for our conversation.

Second, some people talk in "noun languaging," they frame topics of discussions and discuss those areas of focus usually from a perspective of observation (and/or opinion!). Other people focus on "verbs;" they are the ones who talk about the actions, the results, the things that need to be done to achieve.

Thirdly, I listen as much as I can to find out where someone is complaining about something (even subtly). In the complaint, they're on the verge of discovery of something new.

**FH:** *How would you define your self in just one sentence?*

**JW:** I live curiously and passionately in the present, knowing we are clearing a path to a better future of collaboration and contribution.

•