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***Pearls of Leadership Wisdom, Volume II***

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*“Just as Sandra has significantly benefitted our organization with her expertise on succession, development and coaching, I’m betting she’ll have a similarly positive impact on yours. Don’t miss out on Sandra’s wisdom in this book.”*

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*“I have worked with Sandra Davis and have experienced firsthand how strong ‘followership’ can be strengthened in leaders with the right mix of awareness, humility and applied technique. In Pearls of Leadership Wisdom, Sandra demonstrates a magical ability to translate complex leadership and talent development subjects into clear and actionable solutions.”*

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*“Witnessing firsthand the wisdom and spot-on insight that Sandra Davis brings to her board consulting, I’m not surprised that Sandra’s Pearls of Leadership Wisdom has been so well-received by so many, offering just the right advice in the right way and at the right time.”*

**Joe Harlan, Chief Commercial Officer and Vice Chairman  
Market Businesses, The Dow Chemical Company**

*“As I have shared with my NACD colleagues, no one has all the answers or can predict the future. Yet each of us has at least some of the answers and by revealing our ideas and experiences we are able to enrich others. That’s really what Sandra Davis is all about: sharing her ideas, experiences and knowledge to help enlighten, improve and benefit others.”*

**Reatha Clark King, Ph.D. Board Chair, National  
Association of Corporate Directors (NACD)**

***Pearls  
of Leadership  
Wisdom  
Volume II***

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***Lessons for  
Everyday Leaders***

by  
**Sandra Davis, Ph.D.**



**MDA LEADERSHIP  
CONSULTING**  
*Advancing Great Leadership Since 1981*

*Pearls of Leadership Wisdom, Volume II: Lessons for Everyday Leaders*  
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Cover by Gieser Design  
Interior Design by Patti Frazee  
Interior Image of Pearl: ©istockphoto.com/malerapaso

ISBN: 978-0-9857503-2-9

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## *Wait, Wait – Do Tell Me*

One day, I ran into a woman I had not seen for years. We had worked together in an intensive leadership development program for educators. In the ensuing conversation, I was taken aback when she told me, “I’ll never forget what you said to me – that you believed I was setting the bar too low for myself. You were right and I have kept your words in front of me – ‘You can do more than you think.’ I have always wanted to thank you for that.” Her comments surprised and delighted me, but to be honest, I don’t recall saying those words to her.

Has that ever happened to you? You discover that something you said or did is remembered in detail even though you don’t recall the specifics? One of the wonderful unplanned returns of being a leader is hearing about the positive impact you have had. As leaders, we often take pains to leave an impression through important formal communications – we painstakingly craft

speeches, rehearse town hall sessions, film videos, and write vital e-mails, seeking to convey just the right words. However, it's often the personal messages or even the side comments we don't recall making that leave a lasting impression.

My point is to realize, whether you are aware of it at the time or not, that others are constantly listening, observing, and learning from your words and actions. What a great reward when you discover that you did and do make a difference. I hope you get to experience that gift regularly.

## Ideas for Action

Because you cannot control what someone else will retain from their interactions with you, this is not about how to become a memorable leader. Almost all of the leaders I work with tell me they want to have a positive impact. They measure it through all kinds of means: financial results, organizational growth, innovation, development of others, team performance, and public recognition. Yet what consistently touches these leaders the most are the positive words of feedback they hear from their colleagues and partners (not to mention friends and family!).

Unfortunately, those telling comments about positive impact frequently only happen years later, when the leader leaves, retires, or worst of all, passes on! Or, as in my experience, it happens

through a chance encounter. Most leaders get very limited positive feedback from their team members. People simply assume they don't need it. Yet truly, who doesn't like to hear words of encouragement?

If there is someone whose words or actions you particularly remember, or who made a difference for you, don't wait for the bon-voyage party. Tell them now! You'll be giving a great gift that will likely come back to you someday.

# Notes

You don't need to wait until you're near or at retirement to achieve your own state of preferment. Consider some of the first-year preferment steps I have taken.

## Ideas for Action

As I've discovered, the key to preferment is taking multiple, proactive steps:

- *Demonstrate change.* My preferment began on December 1, 2013 – the official day Scott Nelson took over for me as CEO of MDA Leadership Consulting and I shifted to a new role. It was a literal, not just a figurative move. I took the time to review and toss much of 30+ years of accumulation, and moved several doors down the hall, so there would be no confusion (to me or anyone else) about my new role. Lesson: If you want to move to a new role, you need to be visible about it, for yourself and others.
- *Make the effort.* Yes, my office change was symbolic for our staff and framework-changing for me! You see, the office I now occupy is not in the mainstream of staff and client activity. People no longer pop in just because they are walking by; now, I often have to leave my office to informally connect with others. Lesson: If you want to be included or noted by others, you need to make the effort.

- *Make deliberate time choices.* My sweet-spot work – the work I love to do – is with CEOs and boards on CEO succession, coaching, and selection. Now I get to do even more of that than I could do before. In the meantime, I have learned to say “no” to things that don't fit into that focus – or at least recommend someone else who can do the work. Lesson: If you don't make deliberate time choices, the Pac-Man of demands will eat up your time. I have learned that saying, “No, not for me, but I'll connect you with the right person” is liberating.
- *Make room for spontaneity.* In the book, *Portfolio Life*, author David Corbett talks about time as an asset. We all need to figure out how heavily we want to weight each component of our days according to what is important and needed. In preferment, I have had to sort through all the parts of my life portfolio, including paid work, volunteer activities, time with family and friends, travel, learning, and the part I have not yet mastered: spontaneous activities. Lesson: If you fill up every second of your whole time portfolio, you cannot take advantage of spontaneity.
- *Accept outside help.* I learned I had to be disciplined about when and how much I was going to work. Since I had decided to cut back to working 80-percent time, I knew that was not going to happen without intentional

planning. It took me a while, but with some “special counseling” from my husband, I figured out that my best approach is “all in” for 4 or 5 weeks and then one week off. Much preferred! Lesson: Accept help from those who care about you.

- *Keep learning.* Finding more time for your passions is important, although to be honest I am still defining which will take priority! So, a month ago I started taking jazz piano lessons. I have also had the chance to spend more concentrated time on two non-profits I love (Jeremiah Program and Opportunity International). And, one of my great joys is spending time with our grandchildren and learning new things through their eyes. Lesson: No matter your role or years of experience, there is always more to learn.

As a leader, you do have the power to choose how you spend your time – how you weight that portfolio. Ask yourself, “Does how I spend my time reflect my version of preferment and my values?” You don’t have to wait to find out – as my own experiences can attest!

# Notes

# Q and A

*with Sandra Davis, Ph.D.*

*Editor's Note:* As an executive coach and specialist in senior executive talent evaluation, CEO selection, and succession planning, Sandra Davis is frequently asked about her viewpoints on leadership. Below are excerpts from a recent dialogue with Sandra on the subject of leadership.

*Q: Sandra, when and how did you first become truly interested in leadership?*

**Sandra Davis:** When I was in grade school, I often organized others to do things...I thought it was cool to be up in front and in charge of something. I liked helping with class activities, particularly music. As a second child, bracketed by two brothers – one 7 years older and one 7 years younger – I became accustomed to being independent, self-sufficient, and even happy to make decisions.

Then, during graduate school, when I had the chance to be involved in projects that put me in the business world, I observed so many individual differences in leadership styles and approaches. It was the beginning of my understanding that leadership is an intentional choice, and no one style fits all circumstances.

*Q: In your 30-plus year career, what has been your greatest leadership learning experience?*

**Sandra Davis:** There has been a real accumulation of “small moments” over the years, based on my work with leaders, day in and day out. I’ve been fortunate to learn about leadership firsthand, through the experiences of other leaders. I have been able to translate those lessons into a long series of “ahas” that have helped me guide and coach others.

On a personal level, serving as board chair of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra during the worst of times was a tremendous chance to learn. Within a short span of time, our CEO resigned, we experienced the greatest amount of debt in the organization’s history, the musicians’ contract was up for renegotiation, and they were hinting at a strike. I didn’t ask to lead at that exact time; it just happened. It impacted me on many levels, but our board successfully navigated all of these challenges.

In retrospect, I learned about resilience, humility, and leadership as a team experience from our interim CEO, John B. Davis, Jr. (no relation), who was the former Macalester College president and former head of the Minneapolis school board. He had this impressive ability to stay calm no matter what, and to keep his sense of humor.

*Q: What leadership trait(s) do you most admire?*

**Sandra Davis:** I especially admire leaders who are intellectually curious and willing to have (and entertain) disparate points of view and experiment with something new. Leaders who have that trait approach life in general with a sense of wonder and adventure.

The other element that speaks to me is wisdom; I admire leaders who are wise. These leaders inspire others to trust them and to follow them because of their competence and good, solid judgment.

The other thing I admire is leaders who look out for the good of the organization and embrace the notion of being a steward of the whole.

*Q: What is the greatest leadership mistake you regularly see, and why do you believe it happens?*

**Sandra Davis:** The greatest mistake I regularly see is when leaders cut themselves off from information...because they believe they should be smarter than others, because they’re isolated from others’ input, or because they think they have to be the hero. In reality, no one person can have all the answers, so do all you can to “give up” the thought that you alone have to know what is best. Work hard to get input and perspective from all concerned. You will be a stronger leader because of that.

*Q: When interviewing someone for a leadership role, what should you particularly look for?*

**Sandra Davis:** I look for evidence that the individual has truly worked hard, and maybe even sacrificed, to get to where he or she is today. People who've worked hard or had to stay the course despite obstacles they encountered have developed an "inner drive" and even resilience that can't be taught or duplicated.

Also, I think about this: can I imagine working with this person? Would it be a good experience? Chances are, if I react positively, so will others. But be careful with this one: your emotional reactions are not foolproof!

*Q: What are your top brief tips for becoming a better leader?*

**Sandra Davis:** Learn from experience...if you are intentional about learning from your experiences, both good and bad, and about extracting the lessons right before your eyes, you will put yourself ahead. There are many ways to learn from experience, ranging from personal reflection to asking for feedback from others. Just be willing to be a learner.

*Q: Why are so many leaders ineffective?*

**Sandra Davis:** This question comes up often...I believe leaders at the top often promote someone

based on his or her outstanding success in one area. We all look for evidence, but success at one level does not necessarily correlate to success at the next. It's also because organizations have not done a very good job of leadership development through experience, despite lip service to the contrary. Leaders with narrow experience are handicapped before they start.

One of the keys to combat this is to get leaders quality leadership-development experiences and make sure they are getting the tools and guidance they need to learn from the experiences they have.

*Q: When a leader gets stuck for an answer or solution to a troublesome problem, what's the best way to get unstuck?*

**Sandra Davis:** Sleep on it! As my grandmother used to say, "I'll take my pillow to it!" Or find a trusted advisor who can be a great sounding board or counsel to you.

*Q: What do you believe will be the greatest workplace challenges to leaders of the future?*

**Sandra Davis:** The need for speed, adaptability, and real collaboration, which is not just getting along, but about truly being able to work effectively together and achieve interdependence. All of these challenges are accelerating the need for leadership development now.

*Q: If it were possible, what career or leadership advice would you give to a younger version of yourself?*

**Sandra Davis:** Be bold early. That is, I would be comfortable more quickly with the fact that I'm a consultant, and that clients are paying to hear from a truth-teller, not a soft peddler. That is intuitively obvious, but there can be inner doubts asking, "Who am I to be saying all of that?"



## *About the Author*

**SANDRA DAVIS** is chair and co-founder of MDA Leadership Consulting in Minneapolis, a premier national leadership-development firm. As leader of MDA's CEO and Board Services, Sandra specializes in working with CEOs and boards on CEO selection and succession planning, senior-executive talent strategies, and executive coaching for C-suite leaders. She is widely known as an industry thought leader, counting many Fortune 500 firms among her clients.

Sandra earned her Ph.D. in counseling psychology with an emphasis in industrial-organizational psychology from the University of Minnesota, and she is a fellow of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology and of the American Psychological Association. She has

authored numerous professional articles on topics related to assessment, leadership development, coaching, and succession, as well as the books *Pearls of Leadership Wisdom* and *Reinventing Yourself: Life Planning After 50*.

In her new life stage of “preferment,” Sandra is combining the type of work she loves the most with opportunities to continue serving on the boards of multiple local and national non-profits. She also continues to enjoy a variety of outdoor activities, explore diverse cultures, play classical piano, and spend time with friends and family members – especially her grandchildren.