

## Remembering Max De Pree 1924-2017



A corporate and civic leader, Max De Pree published eloquent and moving analyses of the qualities of leadership that carried his influence far beyond the company he led and the corporate world in which that company distinguished itself. As chief executive officer of Herman Miller, Inc., he kept the Zeeland, Michigan-based manufacturer of office furniture in the vanguard of innovative, enlightened, and compassionate corporations. Under his direction, the company nearly tripled its sales and was frequently cited as “most admired” by *Fortune* magazine.

Herman Miller also regularly appeared in lists of the “best companies to work for” in the United States, partly because of De Pree’s advocacy for innovative employee programs, such as a “Silver Parachute” (a program designed to protect all employees in the event of a hostile takeover), profit sharing, and employee stock ownership.

De Pree’s books and lectures brought worldwide attention to his original and articulate explorations of business, civic, and personal leadership. De Pree’s first book, *Leadership Is an Art*, received almost unprecedented critical acclaim from people as diverse as management philosopher Peter Drucker, President Bill Clinton, and businessman Sam Walton. Praised for its humanitarian and spiritual insights, the book was described by the *Washington Post* as “small and soulful enough to be carried around like a prayer book—and in some respects, it is.”

Among De Pree’s original insights, he simply and eloquently stated: “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you.” He advocated for “inclusive capitalism,” based on a “concept of persons” rooted in his Christian faith.

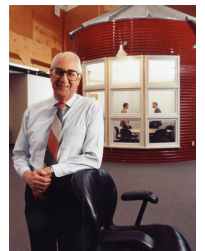
In 1992, De Pree published a second book on leadership, *Leadership Jazz*, which took its title from De Pree’s observation that “jazz, like leadership, combines the unpredictability of the future with the gifts of individuals.” De Pree was also author of three other books, *Dear Zoe*, *Leading Without Power*, and *Called to Serve*. De Pree’s books have sold more than one million copies and have been translated into more than a dozen languages.

Born in Zeeland, Michigan, in 1924, Max De Pree graduated from Zeeland High School and attended Wheaton College before joining the US Army in 1943. His World War II military service consisted of a year and a half with the Third Army in the European Theater and study at the University of Pittsburgh, Haverford College, and the Sorbonne. Upon discharge, De Pree entered Hope College in Holland, Michigan, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree.

In 1947 he joined The Herman Miller Furniture Company, a small, family-owned business bought and renamed by his father in 1923. Early in his career, De Pree developed an interest in architecture, working with Charles Eames on the design for a house in 1954 and with George Nelson in 1958 on the company’s headquarters. After serving in various roles in operations, sales, and marketing, he moved to Europe to manage the company’s European and international operations in 1968 and to direct the company’s building of facilities in Bath and Chippenham, England. Subsequently, De Pree led Herman Miller, Inc., to work closely with prominent architects to build widely acclaimed corporate facilities.

In 1981, the American Institute of Architects honored the company with its AIA Gold Medal for “dedication to design excellence.” In 1991, the Los Angeles chapter of the American Institute of Architects gave De Pree its Presidential Commemorative Award, and he was named an honorary member of the Michigan chapter of the AIA.

In 1971, De Pree was elected chairman of the board at Herman Miller. Under his leadership, the Board began to include people from many disciplines and became a truly diverse and professional group. In 1980, De Pree became chief executive officer and advocated participation and “inclusiveness” at Herman Miller, two qualities for which the company was



widely admired.

De Pree held seven honorary degrees and served on the boards of Hope College and Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. After 40 years on the Fuller board, the school established the Max De Pree Center for Leadership in 1997 in his honor. In 1992, he was elected to *Fortune* magazine's National Business Hall of Fame. He also served on the Peter Drucker Foundation Advisory Board.

Once when a financial analyst asked him what problems faced Herman Miller and its leaders, De Pree replied, "the interception of entropy." He saw corporate deterioration as a constant threat, signaled by "a dark tension among key people," "manuals," "leaders who rely on structure instead of people," "a loss of grace and style and civility," and "a loss of respect for the English language."

In his talks to groups from the University of London Business School to the American Institute of Architects to students at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, De Pree stressed the importance of organizational history, innovation, the need for leaders to be "vulnerable" to the talents of others, and the "authenticity of individuals." He also became interested in mentoring, wrote about the subject, and mentored business, church, and non-profit leaders. He wrote, "I believe this give-and-take relationship is the most effective way to guide people with leadership gifts toward their potential," and "Try to remember mentoring is a process of becoming, not an unimpeded march to perfection."

He is survived by his wife, Esther, his indispensable partner, his sons, Charles and Kris, his daughters, Jody and Nancy, their spouses, 23 grandchildren, and 13 great-grandchildren.

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