

YOU
CAN LEAD

*30 Life Lessons to Empower
the Leader Within*

BY DOROTHY BUCKHANAN WILSON

You Can Lead

*30 Life Lessons to Empower
the Leader Within*

Published by D. Innovare Collective
Copyright ©2019 Dorothy Buckhanan Wilson
All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America

ISBN #978-0-578-49252-0

*This book is dedicated to everyone who
poured advice, lessons, knowledge and
wisdom into me on this leadership journey.
I am grateful for each of you.*

*I*NTRODUCTION

Leaders aren't born, they are made. If you allow it, the leader within you is formed through a lifetime of seemingly insignificant and monumental lessons that peak in potential when your life places a demand on your ability to lead.

The demand for leadership was placed on my life early, when I was a teenager thrust into the role of caregiver for my aging grandparents in Sumter, South Carolina. While other junior high and high school students are navigating their first crush, pop quizzes and peer pressure, imagine having to make adult decisions for the family, including two younger siblings; managing a household budget and sensitive health care matters; and earning honor grades, all while maintaining the façade of normalcy.

That was a challenging and defining time in my young life. At the age of 14, I learned how to care for others, make budget decisions and run a household of five, very strong personalities. I missed the experience of being a teenager, as I transitioned right into adulthood.

I became the involuntary, *unofficial leader* of the family due to circumstances beyond my control. I learned early on about responsibility, taking risks, being courageous and pushing forward at a time when other teen girls in my neighborhood were worried about grades, clothes, boys and college plans. Despite this, with the love and support of my family, I was able to persevere and went on to college, as the first of my grandfather's thirty-four grandchildren to receive a post-secondary education. The leadership skills I've learned early in life helped me serve in numerous leadership positions during my college career, such as a three-year officer within student government and as president of Psi Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated.

The realization that **I could lead** on a large scale became clear to me when I ran for, and narrowly lost, a bid to become the second female president of our college's Student Government Association. This too was a critical moment in my leadership

journey. If I would have let that loss define me, my successful career in business, which now spans four decades, would have eluded me and I would not have been able to positively impact millions of lives.

The 30 lessons outlined in *You Can Lead* were created to help you achieve your leadership potential in a practical step-by-step way. They worked in my own life, in the lives of others I've mentored and can be applied in any personal, family or career situation you encounter. Leadership skills are used in thousands of daily interactions. *You Can Lead* is a resource to help YOU engage with others better, perform at an increased level of excellence, and elevate your game plan to be successful.

Leverage *You Can Lead* as your personal resource guide with practical steps to turn lessons into action that will improve your life. Read a lesson a day for the next 30 days and refer back to it often. As you move forward in accomplishing great things in your own life, remind yourself during those still moments of doubt or hesitation ... **You CAN Lead!**

LEADERSHIP LESSON ONE

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YOU MAKES

I recently closed out my term as the International President of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated. As I looked across the faces of more than 19,000 women in attendance at our 68th biennial international conference, one thing was clear. Among all of the brilliance in the room, I sincerely appreciated the imprint I had made on the role that couldn't be duplicated by anyone else. For the first time, I let it sink in that I was one of only 29 women who had held this title, since the organization started in 1908, and the enormity of it hit me. In that pause, I realized we each have a one-of-a-kind fingerprint that we should leave on everything we touch.

As proud as I was of all that I'd accomplished over a successful career and during my AKA presidency, I had rarely, if ever, celebrated me and what I brought to the table. Who has time for that when there's always work to be done, right? However, at that moment, I allowed myself to be empowered by the uniqueness of my gifts, personality and passions. Did it mean I was special? Not necessarily, but it meant I was ME. At that moment, I understood that being ME was more than enough. Likewise, YOU are more than enough.

Early in life, I learned that each of us can make a difference in our own way. Because of this, I have never been satisfied to follow the trend or do what others do. Every assignment or task I embark on has been with the goal of completing it at a different level.

My background and training in leading and interacting with people have been non-traditional to say the least. As a first-generation college graduate, I did not come to the table with finely tuned leadership skills passed down to me from parents or mentors.

Instead, I brought valuable *life lessons* to the equation, learned from being self-sufficient since the age of 14 and having to make major family decisions for my grandparents and two younger

siblings. I was reared by my loving grandparents in Mayesville, South Carolina, a small, rural farming community approximately 50 miles from the state capitol of Columbia. Resources were limited because my grandparents were retired, but they reared my siblings and me with strong values, a thirst for education, solid work ethic and a spiritual foundation that remains rock solid to this day.

Due to failing health, by the time I entered ninth grade, the day-to-day care and responsibility for our household, both grandparents and my two younger siblings, rested on my shoulders.

Leadership was entrusted to me at a young age and it was a crash course in decision-making, time management, budgeting, responsibility and relationship building.

My family knew they could trust and count on me to take care of them. In a sense, I became an untapped reservoir of strength during this difficult and challenging time in our lives. This family leadership experience taught me valuable lessons in compassion, wisdom and courage. Because of their faith in me, I was able to step out of my comfort zone, see where I could make a difference and had the courage to go out and do it. That spirit of *making a difference* by taking action followed me throughout my personal and career life.

Here are four valuable lessons I learned:

1. **Ask forgiveness, not permission** — As a leader, I did not always wait for the official blessing of others to execute once due diligence was completed for a new initiative. Sometimes we did not have the luxury of time or it was simply not wise to wait for permission. We proceeded with setting stretch goals and developing action plans designed to improve the lives of those we serve.
2. **Don't be shy** — Teams under my supervision took on assignments that were considered tough and did not shy away from challenges. Oftentimes, women are not exposed to challenges and growth opportunities because we are perceived as risk averse, but throughout my career, this is where I knew my unique leadership style and approach could make a difference.
3. **Be a risk-taker** — As a leader, I learned early the importance of empowering those around you to take risks and not settle

for the status quo. To be strategic and to lead with an air of creativity and excitement have been the goal of every assignment and task I’ve faced to date. My objective is to always leave things better than the way I found them, which has been accomplished by being clear about objectives on the front end.

4. **Be yourself** — I’ve learned through countless experiences that lasting success comes to those who lead with authenticity and truth. As a leader, you must know what you are good at, but also be willing to admit your failures. A few years back, one of the conferences I was leading experienced major problems resulting in a lengthy registration, onsite issues, and just bad customer service all around. Instead of blaming others, our management team openly assumed responsibility for problems and worked to help fix things, including standing for eight hours in the registration lines to speak with attendees to address concerns. We also added the personal touch of providing refreshments, seating, music and updates on our progress. This was me “being myself” as a leader, and by dealing with the crisis immediately, our team members saw the importance of “owning” all aspects of leadership.

LEADERSHIP ACTIONS: YOU CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

You can make the difference and lead in *your* unique way. How?

- Establish your unique leadership brand by committing and distinguishing yourself. Sure, work smarter, but also be disciplined and put in the extra effort. Write down what about your distinct leadership style, personality and passion set you apart in the minds of those you work with.
- Show creativity in all you do and continuously develop your skills by taking on challenges others avoid. To empower the leader within and take your leadership to the next level, you cannot be afraid to set a new standard. Commit to one thing you will do this month to take on a new challenge and stand out from the crowd.