

# Chapter 14

## The Grand Connection: Leadership Is Connecting With Others Through a Greater Purpose

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter outlines first-time leadership characteristics demonstrated by Mae Jemison, the first Black female astronaut in the United States of America, to highlight the qualities and characteristics needed to be a successful first-time leader. These characteristics are qualities leaders can identify within themselves, develop, and implement in their daily practice. This book chapter explores 1) the ability to identify and define a personal vision, 2) having a sense of purpose, 3) vulnerability and the willingness to take risks, 4) courage, and 5) ultimately, how leadership is about seeing and valuing the gifts and talents of others and the ability to truly connect with others to fulfill a greater purpose.*

*“You have the right to be involved. You have something important to contribute, and you have to take the risk to contribute it.” – Mae Jemison*

### INTRODUCTION

In 1992, Mae Jemison became the first Black female astronaut in the United States and has since become a prominent leader in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field. After her NASA career, Jemison established, The Jemison Group, Inc. that explores the connection between socio-cultural issues and engineering and science ventures and founded, The Dorothy Jemison Founda-

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tion for Excellence, a non-profit that supports STEM education. Jemison has numerous achievements to her name that speak to her leadership in education, diversity and inclusion work, and the broader idea that individuals are all citizens of the universe in connection with one another. The idea that all are a valued part of this shared life experience is a theme that is found in her writing and her work, over the years (The Dorothy Mae Foundation, 2020). This theme has propelled her into a distinct category of individuals of first-time leaders who recognize their leadership includes advocating for other's rights to contribute and connect to a greater sense of purpose.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Jemison was born in Decatur, Alabama. Her mother was an elementary school teacher and her father was a carpenter. When Jemison was three years old, the family moved to Chicago where she grew up and attended school. Early in her education, Jemison demonstrated a deep interest in the sciences and the arts and excelled in her studies. She was an honor student, a leader in the Black Student Union and participated in school sponsored theater and dance productions. Jemison pursued a Bachelor of Science degree in chemical engineering at Stanford University, attended Cornell University Medical School, interned and became a general practitioner at the University of Southern California Medical Center, and after serving in the Peace Corp as a medical officer for two and a half years, she decided to follow a long-held dream of becoming an astronaut. Jemison applied and was accepted to NASA's astronaut training school in 1987 (Biography, 2020).

In 2020, Jemison described herself as a “young girl who would stare up at the stars and imagined herself going there.” When she finally realized her dream, she also realized a personal truth: “I felt my being was as much a part of the universe as any star, as any comet...this was my grand connection.” In the book, *Build Unstoppable Teams: The 4 Essential Actions of High-Performance Leaders*, Alden Mills (2019) expands on Jemison's “grand connection” writing, “When you come to understand your ‘why,’ people will figure out their way. And once people do this, people will come to appreciate that they have only two limitations in life: their ability to dream and the courage to follow those dreams” (p. 97). Mills, like Jemison, realized how the powerful force of clarity can guide one to leadership, empowered by the forces of vision, purpose, vulnerability, courage, and connection.

However, it is important to recognize the limitations Mills referenced are personal limitations. There is much more to be said about the external barriers that exist in the context in which individuals strive to lead. In a 2016 address at the University of Virginia, School of Engineering and Applied Science, Excellence Through Diversity Distinguished Learning Series, Jemison reminded lecture participants of one powerful external barrier: she said, “...never limit yourself because of other's limited imagination...” Other's limited imagination can manifest in single incidents of stereotyping, bias, prejudice, and discrimination, it can also serve as a persistent paradigm that reinforces systems of racism and oppression. Jemison experienced both in her academic and professional journey. Yet, she managed to overcome other's limited view of what she was capable of by believing in herself and in her dream- her why - and invoking courage at every step of her way.

Jemison's earliest formative years occurred in the 1960's and 1970's. During her University of Virginia address, she described this time in the United States as a time of remarkable potential and equally significant challenges. The U.S. was making important strides in science, technology, and engineering; it was in 1969, two U.S. astronauts landed on the moon. Yet, in 1968, Jemison also recalls the assas-

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