



My Three Hard Leadership Lessons

It's confession time. Gloria opens up about three important lessons she learned that changed the way she leads, prioritizes, and communicates with her teams. And she offers you practical advice on how to apply what she's learned in your own life and career.

Gloria Feldt: Hello, and welcome to Power to You. I'm Gloria Feldt. I've spent my entire career advancing women's rights and equality from the boardroom to the bedroom. I co-founded [Take the Lead](#) because I figured out how to crack the code that has been holding women back from equal leadership and pay, and now I want to give you all those secrets and tools to prepare and propel you with training and coaching to harness your incredible power to in your professional lives.

Like I always say, just when you think you've got it all together, something is going to rise up and bite you in the butt. So, I wanted to share with you today three leadership lessons I had to learn the hard way. Yeah, they kind of rose up and bit me, every one of them. The first one is you're at the bottom, not the top, of the organizational chart if you're the leader.

The term servant leadership has always annoyed me. First of all, why would you want to be or put someone else into servitude? It smacks of humiliation and classism to me. When I first heard it, it was from a woman in the audience when I spoke at a YWCA leadership conference. After that, I noticed that female leaders in particular seem to glom on to the concept of servant leadership, and I wondered, is that because as women we have been socialized to serve others? To be selfless? And we can only justify taking leadership roles if we can feel like we're doing it for selfless reasons that keep us in secondary roles? Is this just another way women can justify not claiming their power?

But then I was given another way of thinking about this. It was from a diversity consultant who said, "You know, you need to [turn the organizational chart upside down](#), and realize that you can't accomplish anything without the people doing the actual work. You are at the bottom. Not the top." The first time I saw this done at a leadership training, it was like an epiphany, and he literally turned the org chart upside down, so you could kind of feel it physically.

It just made so much sense. A leader actually is a generalist, and the more you rise in leadership, the more of a generalist you become. So, you hardly do any of the

real work of the organization if it's running well, and almost everyone knows more about their jobs than you do. So, you become dependent on them, rather than the other way around. [So, it's not so much about serving as it is about nurturing, supporting, cultivating, and above all, communicating.](#) Which leads me to the second thing I had to learn the hard way.

I had to remember that every word I uttered and every move I made would be noticed, and it would be imbued with extra meaning by other people in the organization. Any time you are in a position of leadership of any kind, people will impute power to you that may be far beyond what you think you have, or far beyond what you actually do have. I'm constantly having to slow myself down, listen, and reconsider whether the intention of my words is hitting the mark I want them to hit.

This is hard for me, because I just move fast and I think pretty fast, and I want to reach the goal that I've set for myself. So, I share that with you to encourage you to watch it and think three times before speaking or doing anything. You know the old Navy adage, loose lips sink ships? Well, that doesn't apply just to keeping secrets. It's also a [good guide to communicating in the workplace.](#)

When I was teaching at Head Start, which was the first full-time job I ever had, I once took 15 children in my class on a field trip one day. It was just myself and one teacher's aide, so it was pretty chaotic. So, a little girl came up to me at one point, she was having a great time, and she said, "Teacher, don't you wish all these children were yours?" And I replied honestly, "No." She immediately burst into tears, feeling rejected, before I could explain to her that her parents would miss her terribly. Also, I had three children at home.

It's kind of like that in every leadership situation. It hadn't occurred to me that one word I had uttered without thinking about how it would resonate in a hurtful way with that little girl. It was certainly not my intent, but I had to spend a good bit of time soothing her afterward, and assuring her that I cared very much for her and all the children, but that clearly their parents would miss them terribly if I took them all home with me. The fact that this episode still haunts me decades later tells you how much impact it had on me.

And that brings me to the third lesson I had to learn the hard way, and it's really hard to keep your energy focused on the right things, rather than worrying about whether people are doing things right. Management of one's energy is really important, so that you don't let the small things sap you or weigh you down. When I became president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, a woman who prior to that had been a peer of mine, a local affiliate leader, warned me, "Don't let them tire you out." She was obviously prescient, because as it turns out, some years later she was one of the very people who did sap my energy by trying to sabotage an important program.

I fought to save that program, and I won, but I exhausted myself, and the internal squabbles drained way too much attention away from the many big external

challenges that were much more deserving of attention, in my opinion. Oh yes, this was a very difficult time in my professional life, and it forced me to relearn the fundamental lesson that [the world turns on human connections](#). I needed to focus more of my energy intentionally on those relationships that are most important to the success of my organization and to me. For me to be able to focus my energy to best advantage and not let myself get too tired, I personally have to prioritize doing an hour of exercise first thing every morning. It gets me going for the day.

But even before that, even before I get out of bed, I put my attention to what I call by the acronym SMITT, [the single most important thing today](#). I write it on my calendar and in my intentions journal that I've created in the notes function of my phone. We'll talk more about intention on many future podcasts, but I did especially want to share this intention tip with you today in regard to managing your energy. SMITT, the single most important thing today. Remember that.

So, those are three leadership lessons, out of many, that I have had to learn the hard way. I want you to practice your power this week by first of all, do try my tip about identifying and writing down your SMITT, single most important thing today, each day for the next two weeks, and see if that helps you manage your energy and keep it focused on the things that really matter to your success. Secondly, do your own 360. Ask a peer, ask somebody you supervise, and ask somebody in a position higher than you are, either in or outside of your organization, to give you feedback on your communication effectiveness.

You don't have to do anything about it then and there, just listen and learn from what they have to say. Let me know how it goes for you by sharing with me on social media @gloriafeldt, or emailing me at powertoyou@taketheleadwomen.com.

Until next week, Power to You!

Power to You is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is our sound designer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. For more about my work, please visit gloriafeldt.com, and follow me on social media @gloriafeldt. To learn about Take the Lead and our courses and coaching services, go to taketheleadwomen.com, and follow us on social media. You can also send me comments about the show and questions on leadership and power to powertoyou@taketheleadwomen.com. I might even use them on future episodes. Be sure to subscribe or follow on your favorite listening app, and please leave a review on Apple Podcasts, as those really help us know what you like about the show. Thanks.

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