



Stop Calling Them Mistakes

Now's an especially good time to do some thinking about who you want to be after the new normal sets in. All the time alone and apart these couple of months have given many of us the rare opportunity to reflect and reconsider. In this insightful review of her own professional path, Gloria offers tangible and tactical ways to emerge and move forward with intention and clarity—to more fully realize the vision you have for yourself at work and in life.

Gloria Feldt: Like I always say, don't call them mistakes, call them learning opportunities. Hello, and welcome to Power to You. I'm Gloria Feldt, here with secrets and tools to prepare and propel you with training and coaching to harness your incredible power to in your professional lives. I've spent my entire career advancing women's rights and equality from the boardroom to the bedroom. I cofounded Take the Lead because I figured out how to crack the code that has been holding women back from equal leadership and pay, and my mission now is for women and men to hold equal power, pay, and leadership positions by 2025.

Are you feeling like your work life and maybe your whole life is completely disrupted and there is no normal? Not even a new normal? Change is a fact of life, but in the midst of a pandemic that has disrupted the entire social and economic fabric, it seems like our professional lives are changing every day. In all that confusion, it's easy to make mistakes. And you know what? That's okay.

Not surprisingly, many of us are having fears these days. Not just about the present, but about the future, too, and that is all understandable. Losing courage out of fear, fear of losing funding, fear of creating controversy, or fear of losing one's job are all real fears. They are just all too real. We know that. These fears have already been realized by many, as millions have been let go, their projects canceled, postponed, perhaps forever. I know I've certainly had several speeches canceled and Take the Lead has had programs delayed or canceled altogether.

No matter how much passion we have for the mission, when we're faced with daily challenges like that, let alone the challenges of a pandemic, we may become timid. We may keep our heads down and respond rather than lead intentionally. That's why I include helping leaders clarify their most deeply held values in our [training](#), because that really helps.

But seriously, it is still true that if you haven't made mistakes, even in the best of circumstances, you aren't learning. You're not taking risks that enable you to grow and thrive, and you're missing opportunities to innovate. Notable accidental life saving innovations have included penicillin and the pacemaker. Life changing

accidental innovations have included things like potato chips, bubble wrap, and the microwave. When I look at my own career, founding Take the Lead after heading Planned Parenthood Federation of America, which is one of the most complex and challenging national organizations, I think of so many mistakes I made and what I learned from them. I also think of the mistakes I inherited and needed to solve in order to make good on the mission.

When I started my first executive director position, in fact, I made every mistake in the book, because I had never led an organization before. I had to learn it all on the job. I broke out in hives every day for the first month, because I knew I was so far in over my head. But what I learned from my experience with a variety of challenges over the years is that the best strategy is always to grow out of a problem, not to contract when resources are tight. I know that is counterintuitive but hear me out.

When I became president of Planned Parenthood, it had a large deficit. The board's response had been to cut programs while preserving the infrastructure, and I know that that seemed logical, but the donors give to be part of an exciting and ambitious program that solves pressing social problems. They don't give to maintain the human resources department, as necessary as that function may be. They want to feel part of something larger than themselves. So, I engaged the whole organization in creating a new vision for what we wanted to have accomplished in 25 years. Thinking that far ahead allowed people to let go of what was worrying them at the moment. They could think expansively, proactively, and boldly. Pretty soon, donors began to return, and we almost doubled the budget. A new energy was breathed into the organization.

So, that's my first tip. Don't stay small and don't play small. Look outward at what the world might need instead of inward at your own problems of the moment. I realize that can be hard to do when you're just trying to take control of a situation and you want everything to be perfect. Yes, many of us have that perfection gene. We're trying to make everything we do at home and at work absolutely flawless. We all know, though, that that is not even possible. We also know, and statistics back this up, that what seems like a failure can open new doors and give us the power to start a new chapter, better than we ever imagined. True, errors that any of us can make can tarnish a career and a professional image, particularly as a woman in the workplace. Not that you need to be perfect all the time, but from early career up to the C-Suite when they don't meet that perfection standard, or when they make what is considered a mistake. And that can affect your upward mobility if you accept it at face value.

But listen, how many men have you seen fail upward? In other words, how many men have you observed who might have even been fired and are quickly given a lifeline by another man, into another and sometimes even higher position? Mainly by rather brazenly asking for it. Boys learn from an early age to play competitive games where there are winners and losers, and everyone comes back to play another day. There is a culture of helping each other. And women are finally

learning the inestimable value of mutual support. As my board chair, Dr. Nancy O'Reilly lays out the case for collaboration in her book, [In This Together](#): How Successful Women Support Each Other In Work and Life.

So, that's the second tip. Sometimes faster is better than better. Sometimes 80% or 90% done is better than 100% of a plan that's still getting perfected on the drawing board. You can always improve it later. And don't let a seeming mistake or failure derail you. Learn from it, and when you're looking for your next position, share how you came about that learning. Own it. It's part of your new toolkit for success. It may even be a badge of honor. If your mistake had a negative impact on someone else, you should own that, too. Apologize directly and set it right if you possibly can, but then move on emotionally.

I know that in the new reality that many of us are facing, it's easy to be overcome with fear about the future and to resist taking risks, and it's challenging to retain those all-important relationships when we're working from home day after day. But we need to keep our eye on the prize and what our goal or personal mission is, so my third tip today is not to lose sight of your mission. No matter how difficult and challenging times are now, they will get better if you keep the mission at the top of your mind. Resist the temptation to make everybody happy all the time. It takes a strong leader to nurture and guide the disparate stakeholders of an organization to coalesce around a vision that remains true to the mission, even as strategies for advancing the mission may change over time due to changes in the marketplace, technology, or funding sources.

I believe it's essential to get extreme clarity, to know when you would walk away, or risk being fired rather than violate those values. Nothing is more liberating than having that clarity. It frees you to do a better job, because it gives you the power to show up in your integrity. And most of the time you discover that people follow people with the courage to have a clear point of view. No organization deserves to survive, unfortunately. You have to earn it every day by staying ahead of the curve, by doing what the world needs from the organization today, by finding the opportunity in the crisis. Power and energy come from projecting out into new spaces, not from standing still. Every perceived threat can become an opportunity to find a new way to serve your purpose.

I interviewed Tiffany Dufu, founder of [The Cru](#) and author of [Drop the Ball](#), for a recent Take the Lead virtual happy hour web chat. When I reached her to invite her to be a guest on the web chat, she told me that she had had to pivot her business from in-person meetups of like-minded women seeking mutual support to virtual. To her surprise, she had experienced a 79% increase in inquiries from women interested in joining since the pandemic began. She discovered that she was meeting a need that even in the worst of times found a market.

When asked for tips about how to stay productive when things are in such a disruptive state, she replied that in the midst of it she knows her purpose. Actually, what she said is she knows why she is on this planet, and it's about advancing

women, and that sense of purpose is what keeps her positive and focused. You never want to merely survive. That's a losing game, guaranteed to result in getting nibbled away bit by bit. Either revitalize the mission or declare victory and move on.

[The March of Dimes](#), for example, was created to fight polio. To remain relevant, it retooled its mission to maternal and infant health after the Salk vaccine all but eliminated the disease. Focus on mission, vision, values, growth, and creating solutions that address what the world needs from you now, and you will always be a successful leader.

There's a quote that I love that says it all. It's usually attributed to Winston Churchill, but really, nobody knows who said it. I just know it's the truth, and it's this: "Victory is not final. Defeat is not fatal. It's the courage to continue that counts."

So, to recap the three tips, first of all, don't stay small and don't play small. Look outward at what the world might need from you, instead of inward at your own problems of the moment. Growing your way out of a setback is always a more effective strategy than withdrawing or giving up. You have gifts to share, and anytime you can solve a problem for others, you can grow your business or advance your career.

Second, resist perfectionism. Sometimes 80 or 90% done is better than 100% of a plan that's still sitting on the drawing board waiting for you to perfect it. You can always improve it later, and don't let a seeming mistake or failure derail you. Own it, get back up, and keep going.

And three, no matter how difficult and challenging times are now, they will get better, so keep your mission at the top of your mind. It will be your guidepost, your touchstone, your inspiration to stay the course until you have realized your intention.

Until next week, Power to You.

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