



## Lessons from Soledad O'Brien: Deploy Your Energy Strategically And Take Back Your Power

Energy is your most precious resource. Yet, in a world where women are constantly reacting, consciously or unconsciously, to microaggressions and systemic oppression, we often squander it. It's no surprise that many of us feel depleted, stressed, and anxious. In this insightful conversation, journalist Soledad O'Brien and Gloria show how to take back the reins, and share concrete tips to marshal your energy to be more focused and intentional, and give your time and attention to what matters most.

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**Gloria Feldt:** Like I always say, power and energy come from moving out into new spaces and doing what the world needs from you, never from standing still or doing what you've always done. 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 life. 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. My mission is for women and men to hold equal power, pay, and leadership positions by 2025. At the end of each podcast, I'll share specific tips that will help you lead and succeed.

A physicist friend once told me that everything in the world is ultimately just energy particles. Neutrinos, to be exact. In my non-scientifically trained mind, I visualized these tiny pieces of matter dancing around amiably and without focus. Well, my friend was referring to the physical world. The principle that everything is ultimately energy applies just as well to leadership and to our individual career arcs. That's because everything we give our time and attention to takes energy.

Now, living through 2020, through a pandemic, racial injustice laid bare, is clearly taking a toll on even the most naturally optimistic and resilient of us. Feeling loss of control, loss of human contact, perhaps loss of jobs, and even loss of the life of someone near and dear. Pent up fury at the murders of Black men and women by those deputized to protect and defend us. Fear for your own life. Stress at having to teach children at home and the uncertainty of whether or when in-person school will open. Not knowing whether it will be safe to let our kids go when it does open. This is a very hard time. I make no mistake about that.

As I talk with women in Take The Lead's courses, such as our [50 Women Can Change the World in Journalism](#), I am more often than ever hearing words like exhaustion, burnout, overwhelmed, stress, feeling drained, anxiety. Organizations as well as individuals can feel the impact and it is very real, but how it affects the individuals in the organization and the organization itself is [determined by how leaders manage and deploy their energy](#). And you know my definition of a leader is anyone who gets stuff done. We can all think and act like leaders, even if that's not our officially designated title.

The feelings that I listed, like exhaustion, burnout, overwhelm, anxiety, those are reactions. So, the question we have to ask ourselves is how do we take the energy we are spending on those absolutely legitimate reactions and turn it into forward movement for change? How do we not let it derail us? How do we not let negative events take over our energy fields? Instead of letting them use us up, how can we use them to focus on the world, or career, or business, or social movement that we want to create?

I recently had the opportunity to talk with one of my own heroes, a most admired television journalist, [Soledad O'Brien](#). Soledad generously agreed to do a Zoom fireside chat with me in front of our 2019 and 2020 cohorts of 50 Women Can Change the World in Journalism. Now, Soledad is an Emmy and Peabody award winner and an executive producer. She's the host of Matter of Fact with Soledad O'Brien. It's a nationally syndicated weekly talk show produced by Hearst Television. And she previously worked with several major networks, including NBC, MSNBC, and she co-anchored CNN's American Morning. She's also the founder of Starfish Media Group, a multiplatform media production and distribution company.

I was fortunate to be interviewed by her a few times, so it was a special pleasure to have an opportunity to turn the tables and ask Soledad how she has been able to create her career with such seeming intentionality and on her own terms through a variety of ups and downs, and despite having experienced racism and sexism in the newsrooms. A philanthropist who devotes both her time and her treasure to helping young women succeed, Soledad is a mosaic of America. Daughter of two immigrants, her father is white, from Australia, with Irish and Scottish heritage, and her mother is Afro-Cuban. I noticed in her conversation that she frequently referred to her use of energy, especially in response to my questions about how she had gained the courage and self-esteem to thrive even in newsrooms where racism and sexism were prevalent.

She related an event that occurred early in her career had made her realize how she was wasting energy when she let negative comments deter her from her own intentions. Listen to Soledad.

Soledad O'Brien:

So, I think it's about being more strategic. When I worked in local news, WBZ in Boston, there was a guy who we had a morning meeting. Started at 7:00 AM. But I did the show that was on before the Today Show. I was an associate producer. So, our show ended at 7:00:00. I would leave that show, leave the control room, run to the bathroom, come to the morning meeting, but it meant I got to the morning meeting at like 7:05, 7:06, so I was late every day because I was doing the show. And there was a guy named John in my meeting who used to always make cracks about, "Oh, Soledad's running on colored people's time. Oh my God." Right? And I remember, but I will tell you I'd go home and I'd think, "When he says that, here's what I'm gonna say. He's gonna do this and I'm gonna do that." I spent so much time thinking about this guy named John. I should name him, but I won't, but I should, but I won't.

I never saw him again when I left that job. Do you know how much psychic energy I put into that bull? So much. And I literally tell people, "Don't do what I did. Focus on growing your career. Focus on opportunities. Focus on staying late, making your writing better, making your reporting better. Focus on getting to know your boss. Focus on understanding how did that person get hired? What skills do you need for this? Don't focus on those stupid, catty, racist, unpleasant, dopy things, misogynistic things that people say." What a waste of energy. It was up to me to decide whose energy. I think certain things do rise to the level of being this has to be a conversation with HR, or this has to be a conversation with my boss. A lot of stuff in newsrooms does not rise to that level and you have to really make sure that you're protecting your psychic energy and working on projects that will grow you, and not getting stuck in those things that are gonna suck you under.

Feldt: The extent to which we deploy energy intentionally and strategically or not determines how we show up as leaders. [It contributes to our success or the lack of it in building our teams and coalescing people together](#), including ourselves, as individuals, to achieve our goals. Using our energy strategically is key to pivot and innovate when faced by something as potentially devastating as a tiny virus that causes big disruption in everything we do.

[A study by James G.S. Clawson published in the International Journal of Organizational Analysis concludes](#) that the very definition of leadership is managing energy. It's also true, and I know this from having been there, that when you fight an adversary for a long time, you can become its mirror, locked into a Kabuki drama that sucks your energy. But at the same time, it becomes your comfort zone, because it doesn't require intentional action. It becomes automatic, reactive, routine. The only way to stop the cycle is to decide enough, stop. We are changing the story.

Too many women's initiatives operate from a position of reacting to gender-based discrimination, rather than redesigning the systems of oppression within which they operate. The success of Black Lives Matter is a tribute to the bold statement of their name. A positive solution. A change in thinking. A direct challenge to the

status quo. And that's why it's been able to foster a reckoning even within the corporate world, which usually shies away from controversy. It's part of why the campaign has succeeded at garnering the support of and sending the most diverse group of people ever onto the streets in support of racial justice.

So, I have lots of tips for you this week.

1. The first one is to take out a sheet of paper and draw a line down the middle from top to bottom. On one side, list what gives you energy, what gives you joy and allows you to live your authentic values? On the other side, list what sucks the energy from you. Then ask yourself honestly, how can you do or get more of the former? How can you do or get less of the latter? And if you are in an energy-draining situation that you can't exit at the moment, how can you create and pursue options that will eventually take you out of it? If you can't figure this out on your own, turn to a trusted mentor, a [coach](#), or a friend who can help be a sounding board and offer you a different perspective.
2. Second, pay attention. This one is really hard for me. Do one thing at a time. I feel like I always have 10 tabs open in my brain. It's often said that women are great at multitasking. We've wired into our brains the behavior of taking care of children while taking care of business and making dinner and getting an MBA. Now, that's a real skill, to be sure, but it is also a drainer of energy from the most important work at hand, so we need to try to just pay attention to paying attention.
3. Thirdly, exercise early and often. Physical movement doesn't drain energy, it builds energy. It fills you with happy hormones. Your mind works better when you're in motion. You have more ideas flowing. You can unplug from the daily grind, leave work behind. For me, exercise first thing in the morning is best, or going out for an hour's walk in the late afternoon feels like a reward from getting work done earlier in the day. Whatever works for you, do it.
4. Fourth, [manage energy, not time](#). Time is granular, transactional. Energy is strategic, long term. Managing energy is working smart, not necessarily hard, or at least not as hard. I find that actually even if I am working hard, I don't get tired when I'm accomplishing something that is meaningful. You've probably witnessed an artist or a craftsperson who works many hours but never seems to be tired. Energy enables us to be the best version of ourselves, and when we're the best version ourselves, we can give our best to others.
5. Fifth, focus on the long view. Creating a long-term vision enables you to let go of the worries of today and project out into an exciting future. Like I said earlier, power and energy come from moving out into new spaces. Not from standing still, not from defending the territory where you are today.

Brett Steenbarger, clinical associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York, [writes in Forbes](#), "The key takeaway is that effective leadership transforms people emotionally, but also cognitively. In the environment energized by the right leadership, we tap into hidden strengths and become better versions of ourselves.

Seeing more, doing more, learning more. Whether we're operating on the trading floor, in the corporate suite, or on a military mission, it's the energy of leadership that enables us to move to a faster battle rhythm."

And finally, don't let the turkeys get you down. Let's give the naysayers and adversaries not one bit of our energy. Let's start in our own thinking from a position of believing we deserve equality. Let's create a new narrative based on the possibilities for solutions that will shape a future where all women and men can thrive. Let's embrace wholeheartedly this truth: We are powerful as hell and we're going to take our rightful place in politics, work, and personal relationships now and forevermore. That's where our energy will go. Are you ready?

Let me know how it goes for you. You can email me at any time at [powertoyou@taketheleadwomen.com](mailto:powertoyou@taketheleadwomen.com). I'd love to know how you're faring. Until next week, Power to You.

Power to You is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is our lead producer. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. For more about my work, please visit [gloriafeldt.com](http://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](http://taketheleadwomen.com) and follow Take The Lead on social media. You can also send me comments about the show and your questions on leadership and power to [powertoyou@taketheleadwomen.com](mailto:powertoyou@taketheleadwomen.com). Be sure to subscribe or follow Power to You on your favorite listening app, and you'd make me really happy if you would leave a review on Apple Podcasts, as those really help us get to know what you like about the show. Thank you.

#### **CITATION:**

Feldt, Gloria, host. "Lessons from Soledad O'Brien: Deploy Your Energy Strategically And Take Back Your Power." *Power to You*, [Take the Lead Women](http://www.taketheleadwomen.com), September 20, 2020. <https://www.taketheleadwomen.com/podcast>

Produced by:

