



GLORIA FELDT
CO-FOUNDER
TAKE THE LEAD

WOMEN IN BUSINESS WEDNESDAYS INTERVIEW

WF: How did you get your idea or concept for your organization Take the Lead Women?

GLORIA: Backward engineering. I wrote the book (No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power) on why women had been stuck at under 20% of top leadership positions for decades even though we had changed laws and opened doors. I have a unique take on why: that women's culturally learned ambivalence toward power lowers our intentions and holds us back.

I proposed a rethink about power, from (traditional male narrative) power over to expansive and creative power TO. I deconstructed each of the reasons why women and men have been socialized differently around power. And being practical, I provided solutions. The solutions are the 9 Leadership Power Tools that along with the power transformation form the core of the program.

People started asking me to teach workshops on this. I saw women have big breakthroughs in their self-awareness and career achievements. That feedback and proof of concept inspired me to form an organization in order to reach a critical mass of women individually and through companies with this simple but profoundly transformational mindset plus practical skills.

And because I believe in going big or going home, we set a bold mission of intersectional gender parity in leadership by 2025.

How we got the name and created the brand is another story for another day.

WF: What motivates you to keep developing new initiatives and expanding your organization?

GLORIA: Feedback from participants has led us to add coaching and create more immersive versions of the core curriculum such as our 50 Women Can Change the World cohorts by industry sector.

Last year's racial reckoning inspired us to do a racial justice review of our curriculum to ensure that we are addressing intersectionality and inclusion properly, and we developed a Culture of Inclusion as a new offering for companies.

Feedback from companies has led us to design and offer shorter workshops and a self-study online version of the 9 Power Tools course.

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After women know and embrace their power, I realized the next question is “the power TO what?” So I wrote *Intentioning: Sex, Power, Pandemics, and How Women Will Take the Lead for (Everyone’s) Good*. Now, I’m creating a new course from it.

It’s all a learning process as we meet needs of clients while staying true to the mission. But also to stay relevant, it’s important to keep asking what the world needs from an organization.

WF: Who have been your support systems in your career?

GLORIA: As a nonprofit organization leader, my board is key. And I’ve always had a close knit group of peers. (Take The Lead is expanding its board right now so consider this a call for Forum members passionate about women’s leadership and willing to help us scale to contact me!)

My husband Alex is always my best cheerleader and my solace in the tough times. And the one who interrupts my zooms to bring me coffee.

I thank so many people who saw more in me than I saw in myself and pushed me or led me to take on more substantial roles.

WF: Since founding Take the Lead in 2014, what has been your most memorable experience?

GLORIA: The most memorable moments for me have always been the spontaneous reports from participants, such as this one from two days ago:

“Three years ago, you impressed on our 50WomenCan group that times of chaos are ideal opportunities to push boundaries, lean into fear, and take risks -- and that advice is one of the precise reasons I embarked on this experiment [doing a film that had just won best in show prize] in the first place. These audience awards are a wonderful sign that I’m on the right track with the content I’m making, and new hats I’m wearing. I’m so excited, and grateful!

Many thanks,
Elisabeth”

An independent evaluation finding that our program works, with 40% of women getting promoted within six months after participating in it. Our launch event in 2014 was epic. People still talk about it. It was SRO in a 3000-seat auditorium and 500,000 globally people watched the livestream. Sheryl Sandberg was the big draw speaker, but Carla Harris brought the house down and trended on twitter globally.

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We've had other events such as the Power Up conference, fundraisers with people like Gloria Steinem and Julianne Moore, Kathleen Turner, and Marina Arsenijevic that were rated as outstanding by participants. But still, it's the impact on individual women and hearing their success stories that move me the most.

WF: What are some difficulties you've encountered in Co-founding and sustaining Take the Lead, and how did you overcome those obstacles?

GLORIA: The biggest obstacle has been fundraising enough to allow us to scale to meet the mission. 2022 has to be the year we overcome that obstacle.

WF: The concept of "Power" is discussed in your latest book "Intentioning" and is an important element in your Leadership Tools Course for women to take. What does Power mean to you and how do you embrace it in your personal life? What must we do as we think about power itself in women's leadership structures? What do we do to re-shape or enhance them?

GLORIA: To me, power is pure energy. It's like a hammer—you can build with it or destroy with it. Because I didn't always have this definition of power, I have to be very intentional about recognizing and using mine. I have a tendency to give my power away in both subtle and obvious ways, using my voice for organizations and people Believe in but not for myself, for example.

As noted in #1 above, when women can think about power on their own terms and embrace it as the generative and innovative power to instead of the oppressive power over, they become much better leaders and happier in their own lives.

But after we embrace our power, the question is: the power to what? That's where intention comes in. Many people have asked me about the word "Intentioning." I made it up, because I couldn't find the exact word to express what I wanted to say when I wrote my new book. It turns the useful, even necessary, concept of intention into an active verb to signify that I'm talking about taking action powerfully on your intentions rather than merely thinking about them. It's putting your power behind your purpose.

WF: How does women rising into their power and leadership affect men? What can men learn from your Leadership Model and how can they help women lead?

GLORIA: Greater parity in power and leadership is proven to make the world a healthier, more prosperous place for everyone. Democracy begins in the home. Companies with more women in their leadership are more profitable. Countries led by women have been more successful managing the pandemic. So my leading like a woman framework can make both men and women better leaders.

These characteristics, such as empathy, collaboration, and listening, aren't hardwired. They are culturally learned so available equally to all genders.

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WF: What would be some advice you would give to a woman who's ready to invest in a new training, program, or leadership model in 2021, especially if they have been out of work or shifted careers during Covid-19?

GLORIA: I wrote Intentioning in part to help women do just that. This is a time when many people are rethinking, retooling, or redesigning their careers. There are stories of women who have gone through the process, and a free workbook with exercises that can help clarify goals and priorities is available on my website at gloriafeldt.com/intentioning.

Much depends on what level of position is of interest and what stage of life the woman is in. This might be a good time of life to get a coach to help her think through her next steps, if working through it herself doesn't feel like enough support. For executive women, one to one coaching is probably worth the investment.

Other resources such as Tiffany Dufu's "The Cru" might be a good fit., especially for mid-career women or entrepreneurs.

Take The Lead's newsletter, blog, and other free resources are available by going to our website.

We offer an online self-study 9 Leadership Power tools course that can be purchased with or without small group coaching. If someone wants to take the course and can't afford it, we can provide a scholarship upon request. We also offer both individual and small group coaching without the course. When funding permit, we have immersive cohorts called 50 Women Can Change the World in various industries.

Any IWF member who wants to chat with me about these options is welcome to contact me directly.

WF: What is some advice you would like to share with your community of Women's Forum members?

GLORIA: There is so much power and influence in this group. Its founders had a strong feminist vision of being the "new girls network." The 21st century version of that could be to use our collective power and influence to advance women on a much larger scale than we are now doing. My advice is to be very intentional about that on both the individual and organizational level. I am certainly willing to help with such an initiative.