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Executive Suite: Former Planned Parenthood Head Gloria Feldt Says “People Don’t Love You More Because You Have Sacrificed Yourself For Them”

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Every week The Grindstone interviews an influential woman (or women) in the world of business. We scour our brains and hearts to come up with strong, successful women who not only inspire us, but will also inspire you. No industry is off limits, no interview subject too controversial.

This week we were lucky enough to talk with [Gloria Feldt](#) who has had quite a career, so it is no wonder she wants to help other women with both their leadership and life skills. Feldt was a teen mom from rural Texas who eventually became president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. As president from 1996-2005 she led the nation’s largest reproductive health and advocacy organization with almost 900 health centers and under her leadership grew to a combined annual budget approaching \$1 billion. *Vanity Fair* named her to its “Top 200 Women Trailblazers, Legends, and Leaders” and she’s also a *Glamour* “Woman of the Year.”

Gloria is now an independent commentator on women’s issues in politics, media and leadership as well as a successful author. Her new book [“No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power”](#) focuses on women’s struggle to reach parity with their male counterparts. Feldt argues that women must shift the way they think about power and leadership for transformational social change to happen. **Gloria Steinem** said “No Excuses” was “an up-to-the-minute, indispensable book. The book is the coach young women need.” Besides speaking at many conferences and seminars, she also teaches “Women, Power, and Leadership” at Arizona

State University and serves on the board of the Women's Media Center. Wow. When does this woman find time to sleep?

Have you ever had trouble asking for a raise?

Worse yet, I hardly ever asked for one because it didn't occur to me! In "No Excuses" I tell the story of how I was just glad to be offered a job I wanted. Only later did I find out that the male candidate had been offered 20% more than me and had declined the position even then. Now I know that women's unwillingness to negotiate starting salaries aggressively costs us on average a cool half-million dollars over our lifetime. This is a \$500,000 mistake I try to help women avoid today. And [this is] one reason I'm so excited to be speaking at the [She Negotiates Leadership Retreat](#) on June 30 where we're all going to learn to make our own pay equity strategies.

What mistakes have you made or regrets do you have? What was the lesson learned?

I regret almost nothing that I ever did, but there are things I regret that I didn't do. I didn't approach my life or career from a position of standing in my power and walking with intention to accomplish a personal mission or dream I was leading myself. As a result, I gave too much of myself and was subsumed by the organization. While it was extremely gratifying to know that my work enabled women to access the health care they needed to determine the course of their lives, I wasn't really steering my own. I didn't set boundaries for myself—I always tried to "fix" things for other people, even when they weren't suited for the job. I waited too long to fire people, taking on more work myself or accepting less than excellence. And you know what? People don't love you more because you have sacrificed yourself for them. That was the bitterest lesson learned.

If you had one piece of advice to offer to women who have their eye on eventually reaching the executive level, what would it be?

Define your own terms before someone else defines you. That's probably the single most important of the 9 Ways power tools in "No Excuses" and my own life lessons. Be clear with yourself about what you want and why, own your power to do it, and then work hard to lead your own dreams where you want them to go, persisting till you get there. It's also useful to know that life doesn't very often go in a straight line and that even if you make a bad choice you can re-choose and get back on track.

What was your first job?

Mom. It teaches you most everything you need to know to run an organization. (However I would not advise others to start this job at age 16 as I did.) Then I was a teacher, which gives you the rest of what you need to know.

What personality traits, of yours, would you say contribute to your success?

Openness to fortuity, courage, and integrity.

First I do things and then I learn how to do them. For example, I didn't take my first writing class till I was starting to write my fourth book. I just figured it out and did it.

Find Gloria at her website [Gloria Feldt.com](http://GloriaFeldt.com) with its two popular blogs, [Heartfeldt](#) and [9Ways](#). Tweet her [@GloriaFeldt](#) and connect on LinkedIn and Facebook where she hangs out far too much.

Photo: Gloriafeldt.com