



Planned Parenthood's 25-Year Plan

When Gloria Feldt rose to the top of the high-profile organization, she knew it was time for a change -- and a plan. She also knew that the best plans come from the bottom up.

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Gloria Feldt knew that her organization had to change with the times. The new chief executive of Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) understood in her gut what the then-troubled group needed to sustain its relevance and advance its leadership position. But she also knew this: Whatever her vision amounted to, it didn't stand a chance unless Planned Parenthood's far-flung staffers, volunteers, and donors shaped it. "These people had to participate, or the result would turn to dust," explains Feldt.

Consequently, Feldt began a sweeping two-year process in 1998 that plumbed every corner of PPFA and its 127 affiliates. The objective: to construct a statement of promise, beliefs, and goals powerful enough to carry Feldt's embattled group through the year 2025. Her thoughtful, shrewd approach says much about how change happens in such large, disparate organizations as this.

Why take on such an effort, at once so ambitious and so vague? Feldt's board asked the same question. But Planned Parenthood had become an organization sorely in need of focus. The bitter public controversy around the roughly 200,000 abortions that its clinics perform each year had obscured recognition of its other activities: contraception planning, HIV testing, and breast exams, among others. Affiliates offered different services under different brand names, with little coordination. Many members were worried, because the organization's ranks were graying and it had made only nominal attempts to appeal to younger women.

In early 1999, Feldt recruited a group of 16 Planned Parenthood executives, volunteers, and outside experts. Among them was Watts Wacker, a high-profile futurist and consultant who, it turned out, had served as a PPFA clinic escort for 10 years. Feldt challenged the group to think audaciously about the future, and for the truly long term. A 25-year horizon, she thought, "freed everyone from their immediate agendas."

And there were two more things the group had to keep in mind: The committee would have to be both inclusive and transparent in everything it did. "Inclusivity was our mantra," explains Esperanza Garcia Walters, a volunteer from San Jose, California who chaired the 16-person group. It wasn't just that PPFA's affiliates were suspicious of any national initiative (although they were). More than that, Planned Parenthood's power derived in part from local ferment; the committee's role was to harness and focus that energy, not squelch it.

The pivotal moment occurred at a summit of 325 people, mostly affiliate executives, on Marco Island, Florida. The setting, by design, was more opulent than most nonprofit executives were accustomed to. It said, This is something extraordinary. Speakers, who included Wacker, organizational thinker Dee Hock (creator of the Visa payment system), and geneticist Alan Guttmacher, galvanized attendees with a sense of both fear and possibility. "That," Feldt says, "was the last time I had to sell anything."

The summit's challenge: Translate the urgency of the gathering into "outrageous" action. To that end, PPFA trained two representatives from each affiliate to act as facilitators for the next stage of the strategy process. Armed with 98-page manuals, PPFA's facilitators returned to their local agencies to lead grassroots interactions. Typically, they didn't play by the book. "No one did the exercises the way we had written them," says Jim LeFevre, PPFA's chief strategy officer. But he reckoned that was healthy: If the process

appeared chaotic, it also allowed participants to push the creative envelope.

In January 2001, an expanded steering committee gathered in San Jose to distill the results -- two binders' worth. First, it crafted a statement of promise: "Creating hope for humanity: the freedom to dream, to make choices, and to live in peace with our planet." Then they laid out a set of 13 core beliefs: first, "the right to sexual and reproductive self-determination that is noncoercive, nonexploitative, and responsible." Finally, the group set 10 concrete goals for 2025.

A draft of the document was delivered to everyone who had participated, from the ground up. "We wanted everyone to see the logic as our thinking grew bolder and more audacious," says Tom Conger, one of three consultants hired from the Institute for Alternative Futures.

Even so, when the document came up for ratification at PPFA's national meeting last March, the committee expected that maybe 3 of the 10 goals would be struck down. But it didn't work out that way. Instead, all 10 were approved -- and a few of the goals were even made more daring. Perhaps the riskiest one, to control a diversified media company, was met with near-universal endorsement.

Here was Feldt's victory. Not only had the committee produced a document that faithfully synthesized the tenets of thousands of executives and volunteers across 127 autonomous affiliates, but it also engineered a process with a result that was arguably stronger and more forward-looking than expected. Wacker calls the Planned Parenthood experience a model for nonprofit organizations.

Feldt says that she still gets goose bumps when she reads the statement of promise. But a promise, of course, only goes so far. By March 2002, various committees are expected to deliver their implementation plans for each of the 10 goals. After that, Planned Parenthood has 24 years left to deliver the goods.

Visit Planned Parenthood on the Web (www.plannedparenthood.org/vision2025). [Sound off](#) with your smartest ideas for planning and change.

Sidebar: Woman With a Plan

How do you lead deep-seated change in a large organization where just about everyone expects to have a voice? Here are a few rules that Gloria Feldt used to pull it off at Planned Parenthood.

Create urgency. PPFA's affiliates had to understand that this was a crucial moment, "that we really could change the direction of the organization's future," says consultant Watts Wacker. The solution: an invitation-only summit with big-name speakers.

Include everyone. Feldt's committee pushed itself to get input from every corner of the organization. That meant hundreds of meetings with affiliates, whose input was distilled at regional sessions. Many affiliates also involved their clients and community groups.

Adapt the process to the culture. A by-the-book style never would have flown at PPFA. So the organization designed a standard innovation process, but it let local groups veer off course, as desired.

Make it transparent. At every turn, the PPFA committee published and shared the results of its work. The idea was that including people in the process would win support -- and would also sharpen the final product.

Lead, but don't control. Feldt, says Wacker, "saw that you can't 'increment' yourself into the future. She got her board to listen, then put people in place who responded." But she respected the culture of her organization; she recognized that change needed to be driven from deep in the ranks as well.



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