



**MICHELE  
BOOTH COLE**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
SAFE SHORES

"Power is about  
sharing leadership and  
cultivating others to get  
things done with a real  
sense of excellence."

## *The 10 Principles of*

# POWER

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A TRUE LEADER? TO START, YOU MUST BE WILLING TO EMBRACE YOUR STRENGTHS. APPLY THESE TEN ESSENTIAL TRAITS OF POWER PLAYERS, FOR A SWIFT CLIMB UP THE LADDER OF SUCCESS

BY LONNAE O'NEAL PARKER

## 1 THEY KEEP THE END IN SIGHT

Six months into her job as executive director of Safe Shores—The DC Children’s Advocacy Center, a nonprofit that works with abused children, Michele Booth Cole was tasked with negotiating with the city to acquire a new building. “We wanted a space that would serve more families and be more child-friendly,” says the 46-year-old. “The idea was always to own the building.” But when city officials told her that owning was out of the question, Cole had to reassess. As she weighed her options, she realized that the overarching goal was securing a larger space. So Cole made a counteroffer. Her organization would lease the new space from the city, but Safe Shores had to have a central role in its design and layout. The proposal was a turning point in the negotiations. “Taking a flexible approach allowed the project to move forward and demonstrated selflessness on our part,” she says. “We had our eyes on a higher goal of being able to serve children in a facility that was worthy of them.” Last year Safe Shores moved to a newly renovated 37,000-square-foot building with separate waiting rooms for clients, offices for medical and legal personnel, and a mental health suite. According to Katherine Tyler Scott, a managing principal of the Indianapolis-based company Ki ThoughtBridge, which specializes in leadership development, Cole’s ability to focus on the nonprofit’s mission was a key factor in using her power: “A leader who’s self-aware and knowledgeable about a company’s core values can guide critical decisions and enable the organization to be prudent under pressure.”

## 2 THEY COLLABORATE

In 2010 Danielle Torain was working full-time while attending law school. One week before exams, she was asked to coordinate Baltimore’s citywide response to a national grant competition designed to provide educational services to low-income communities. Torain, 27, contacted a large number of individuals and organizations—private, nonprofit, government and philanthropic. “The goal was to get stakeholders who don’t normally interact to come to the table and share resources,” says Torain, who now works as a senior director of Strategy & Development at the Center for Urban Families in Baltimore. As a result of Torain’s efforts, the 340-page document was submitted with 49 public and private partners and 58 letters of support from officials. Torain’s accomplishment exemplifies what Ginny Clarke, president and CEO of Talent Optimization Partners, describes as the ability “to empower others, get the best out of them and give them what they need to be successful.”

## 3 THEY ARE SERVANT LEADERS

Whether it comes from spirituality or a belief in the social good, there is power in recognizing a purpose greater than yourself. As a practicing social worker at a children’s hospital in Philadelphia, Liz Horsey, 53, says she’s had to rely on her faith to carry her through tough situations. In the ER, she saw examples of children who had been mistreated and often had to comfort parents as they came to terms with the knowledge that the abusers might have been family or friends. “I had to think of words of

encouragement to ease their pain,” Horsey says. Being a social worker in a medical setting requires both resilience and authority, which Horsey says God has given her. “I am able to advocate in the midst of those who disagree,” she says. “I can point out people’s strength when others see weakness. I understand all too well when people see flaws and write you off as useless. That is why I have so much compassion.” Leadership development expert Scott notes that while technical skills may keep the trains running, it’s not the ultimate characteristic of a good leader. “It takes personal security to be able to stand in that place of conflict, where people differ, and still be able to listen respectfully, question yourself and still come out whole,” she says. “Such leaders have done enough inner work to make their outer work effective.”

## 4 THEY CHART THEIR OWN COURSE

Angela Petitt has always loved the following quote by author Jim Rohn: “Time is more valuable than money. You can get more money, but you cannot get more time.” A veteran of the information technology industry, Petitt, 43, was working on a project in 2009 when she had her “aha” moment. The avid traveler was daydreaming about touring Greece when an idea came to her: “I realized that I would rather take a chance on myself to see the world than continue on the daily grind.” Despite the recession, this single woman, then 41, took a leap of faith. She started “massively saving” and paying off bills. After four months she quit her job. “I really had no clue what was next,” she recalls. “But a few days after my last day at work, I was on a plane to Italy!” It has now been two years. While on her self-assigned sabbatical, Petitt has learned to play golf; ride a horse; fly a small airplane; climb the Great Wall in China; dive in caves in the Dominican Republic; and experience freezing cold temps in Siberia. To make it work, she says, she had to come up with ways to travel in luxury without breaking the bank. Her mantra: Set a \$1,000 budget for any trip, no matter where she was going or how long the stay. “You have to be diligent,” says Petitt. “Search for cruises on sale, airline tickets on special, hotel discounts—anything that’s going to give you an experience at a great value and cost.” She also blogs about her travels at sabbaticalscapes.com to motivate others to create the lives they want to lead. “Don’t be afraid of the space between your dreams and reality,” she says, quoting another mantra. “If you can dream it, you can live it.”

## 5 THEY REINVENT THEMSELVES

Growing up poor in Kansas City, Missouri, Sheila Brooks, 55, watched her mother work two jobs while instilling in her two daughters the value of education. Inspired by her mother’s example, Brooks made it her goal to mentor young people, create jobs for people of color and leave an entrepreneurial legacy. “I’m very demanding of myself because I set a high standard of excellence and quality,” says Brooks, an Emmy Award-winning news producer and founder, president and CEO of the media company SRB Communications. After starting out as a news reporter in the late seventies, she opened a home-based video surveillance business in Prince Georges County, Maryland. Ten years later the business >



**SHEILA  
BROOKS**  
PRESIDENT AND  
CEO, SRB  
COMMUNICATIONS  
“As you strive  
for excellence, you  
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yield to win.”

had grown to 73 employees, and annual revenues in excess of a million dollars. Then 9/11 happened. Overnight, Brooks lost 60 percent of her business, as contracts with police departments and high-level security agencies dried up. It was time to diversify. “Strategically figuring out where we needed to go took courage and determination,” she recalls. “You have to be a risk taker.” She created a board of advisers and went after longer-term contracts, branching out into webcasting, advertising services and media placement. As the company grew, Brooks remained true to her mission of empowerment. That laser focus put her on billboards in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area earlier this year, as part of Jones New York’s Empowering Your Confidence campaign. The clothing campaign showcased real people who wielded power, including heavy hitters such as former President Bill Clinton’s press secretary, Dee Dee Myers. Today Brooks is once again evaluating her next move. She aims to continue to provide quality services while creating media platforms for people of color. And she intends to take some time to enjoy her efforts. “My goal is to sell the business in the next seven years,” she confides. “As Black women we must always know when to reinvent ourselves. We have to be willing to reengineer.”

## **6** THEY HELP OTHERS ACHIEVE

Kimberley Greenfield Alfonso, 53, had always been good at connecting the dots between her grand ideas and the people they would serve. When she left her position as senior regional director at Merck & Co. nine years ago to care for her visually impaired 3-year-old daughter, she found herself thinking, *Now what am I going to do?* “I was so connected to being a corporate

woman,” she explains. “I had gotten to where I wanted to be. I had arrived.” At the same time Alfonso, then 45, realized that she had met a lot of professional women in their forties who were at pivotal points in their lives. Some were married, pregnant or divorced for the first time. Others were trying to make decisions around starting businesses or becoming stay-at-home moms. These women needed help laying a foundation for their second acts, and Alfonso decided to lead the way. A master networker, she invited 65 of the most accomplished women she knew to get together. “I wanted them to come into the warmth of my home and feel free to share,” she says. As an icebreaker, she gave each woman a plastic butterfly and challenged them to find the other three women who shared the same butterfly. Her goal was to help the women realize the resources they could offer one another. Now, nine years later, the group is known as the Butterfly Club and hosts quarterly meetings where Washington, D.C.-area women discuss their latest business or philanthropic ventures. Alfonso, who’s now the chief operating officer of the Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind, says the power of the group comes from the women asking for support—and receiving it.

## **7** THEY TAKE THE INITIATIVE

A year ago, real estate broker Sharon McLennon, 50, was an incoming board member for a real estate trade organization. At her first meeting, the 12-member group discussed the need for a Web site and reached what appeared to McLennon to have been a consensus. But after two more months of meetings, no work had begun on the Web site. “I got so frustrated by the fact that nothing had been done on a relatively simple project,” she recalls. But McLennon refused to play the blame game; instead she decided to take matters into her own hands. “When the agenda item came up in the next meeting,” she says, “I said, ‘We’ve got a Web site, the content is written, we’ve got a designer—I just need the board to approve this and we can get this up and running today.’” The group was shocked. “All things being equal, the best of the best will have emotional intelligence, self-awareness, self-management, social skills and motivation,” notes leadership expert Scott. Recognizing the self-starter in their midst, the board voted McLennon to an executive leadership position earlier this year.

## **8** THEY LOVE TO LEARN

While interviewing hundreds of people on the subject of love as part of her work as a writer and editor, Charreah Jackson, 26, recognized the need for more education and resources for Black women. She went back to school to become a certified family life educator, trained with top relationship experts, and established the consulting agency Studio Social in Harlem. Jackson now travels the country speaking about relationships and women’s issues at such venues as the 2009 Women & Power Conference, headlined by Gloria Steinem. “Good leaders read everything, network with people at the level to which they aspire, and go back to school for additional training,” says Washington, D.C.-based career coach Jackie Jones. Jackson carefully mapped out her strategy. As part of her planning process, she sought out resources and signed up for no less than 15 relationship and entrepreneur-focused newsletters.

“As Black women, we don’t ask our lawyer friend for legal advice; we don’t ask our media friend for PR help,” she observes. “We have to surround ourselves with that powerful energy so we can network and build together.”

### 9 THEY FIGHT FOR A GOOD CAUSE

Raised in a small town in Alabama, attorney Francesca Danielle Allison, 30, learned the importance of giving service by watching her minister father and her mother, who founded an arts and cultural enrichment nonprofit. “Serving has been a part of my fabric,” explains Allison, who says she attended law school to change the world. “Even though I work in a corporate environment now, I want to find ways to use the resources and skills I’ve acquired to give back.” She often looks for chances to do pro bono work. Allison handled two appeal cases based on a provision that allowed Georgia children to receive Medicaid benefits regardless of parents’ income. She represented two kids who were being blocked from the benefit—a 12-year-old with a debilitating bone disease and 10-year-old who’d been born with no eyes and extreme hearing loss. The work was painstaking: Allison spent nearly 200 hours securing affidavits from teachers, physicians and therapists, and driving long distances to visit with one of the kids. She ultimately prevailed. In both cases, the previous decisions to deny them benefits were reversed. “This case required a person who was not just doing what was necessary,” she says. “It required a person who was willing to sacrifice.”

### 10 THEY ARE CHANGE AGENTS

Linetta J. Gilbert’s name isn’t as recognizable as her impact. As senior program officer at the Ford Foundation for nine years, Gilbert doled out millions to worthy causes worldwide. Primarily responsible for grantmaking in the Gulf Coast, the 62-year-old New Orleans resident helped fund reconstruction efforts after Hurricane Katrina, spending a great deal of time listening to what grantees thought about change and provoking them at times to higher ideals. “Sometimes people are in positions because they had the right credentials or knew the right person, but they are not necessarily committed to the mission,” she says. “I try to get inside their heads about their own leadership. I expose them to opportunities to refine their skills, recommending books, meetings and training sessions. I urge them to think about who they are, what’s next and who they are developing to keep their agenda going.” As a grantmaker, Gilbert understands that judgment is a quality of leadership that has to be honed. “You have to learn how to read reality truthfully,” she says. “It is not something people are born with. You have to have opportunities to develop and ask yourself, *Is this real? Or is it only real from my point of view?*” Last year Gilbert was hired to help lead the newly formed Declaration Initiative, which aims to end deep poverty in the U.S. within the next 15 years. “Everybody has an ability to do something wonderful,” she says. “I believe that leaders have to have a higher power to call upon, some larger connection outside of work.” That source, Gilbert says, is her power. □

Lonnae O’Neal Parker writes for *The Washington Post*.



**LINETTA J. GILBERT**

COLEADER,  
THE DECLARATION INITIATIVE

“I’m always looking for new ideas and to see who I can bring along with me, to help them understand the urgency of the work and the role they can play.”