

# Effective Leadership

*Tracianne B. Neilsen, Kathleen E. Wage, Arezoo Talebzadeh, and Anna Diedesch*

Leadership, according to United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower, is the “art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it” (see [bit.ly/3RsDbXl](https://bit.ly/3RsDbXl)). The Acoustical Society of America (ASA) has seen many great leaders since its founding in 1929, from presidents of the Society to students holding leadership positions. Here, we discuss leadership as we recognize two prominent women leaders, Lisa Zurk and Brigitte Schulte-Fortkamp, who were honored at the Women in Acoustics (WIA) luncheons during the ASA meetings in December 2022 and May 2023, respectively.

Leadership is one of the many things for which acousticians and educators typically do not receive formal training. To share ideas on leadership, we sent a questionnaire about leadership to past presidents and vice presidents of the ASA to gather suggestions. Their comments and examples from the honored women have been compiled in this column, which is complementary to the other WIA columns found at [womeninacoustics.org/news](https://womeninacoustics.org/news) (see also [bit.ly/AT-WIA](https://bit.ly/AT-WIA)).



## Lisa Zurk

**Lisa Zurk** was a trailblazer, admired for her innovative technical work and the work she inspired and enabled others to do. With unique expertise in both acoustics and electromagnet-

ics, Lisa incorporated insights from physics to develop new algorithms for sonar and radar signal processing. She held herself and others to high standards, but as Jenn Watson (division head at the MIT Lincoln Laboratory, Cambridge, Massachusetts) noted in her remarks at the WIA luncheon, “if you wanted to learn and grow, [Lisa] would spend a tremendous amount of time helping you.”

Lisa exhibited leadership throughout her career (see [bit.ly/45QZN7u](https://bit.ly/45QZN7u)). After completing a doctorate at the University of Washington (UW), Seattle, Washington, she joined the MIT Lincoln Laboratory, one of only 3 female

full technical staff members in her division and, eventually, one of the first 10 women promoted to laboratory management. In 2005, Lisa founded the Northwest Electromagnetics and Acoustics Research (NEAR) Laboratory at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon. From 2005 to 2016, she advised more than 40 students in the NEAR Laboratory. In 2018, Lisa returned to the UW as a full professor in electrical engineering and executive director of the Applied Physics Laboratory (APL-UW). Lisa was the first woman to serve in that role in the laboratory’s 75-year history. In an interview she said, “As a woman in engineering, you have unique challenges that come up along the way, and it causes you to think, ‘Is this the right field? Do I fit in?’ Studies have shown that female role models can make women comfortable. That can change an environment and create an example that other women can feel more in touch with” (see [bit.ly/3rcv3iJ](https://bit.ly/3rcv3iJ)).

Throughout her career, Lisa broke barriers and was a role model for many in the acoustics and engineering communities. Her leadership was felt at the ASA as the first woman chair of the Underwater Acoustics Technical Committee, chair of the WIA Committee, and national meeting chair. Her absence has been felt since she passed away on January 12, 2022, but her legacy endures in the research she sparked, the colleagues she mentored, and the students she advised.



## Brigitte Schulte-Fortkamp

**Brigitte Schulte-Fortkamp**, professor of psychoacoustic, noise effects, and soundscape research, recently retired from the Technical University of Berlin, Berlin, Germany. Brigitte focused her

career on the importance of soundscapes, a new concept in noise research in the 1990s (for more details, see [bit.ly/3sKtqJq](https://bit.ly/3sKtqJq)). This new area was inherently interdisciplinary, relying on sociology, political science, and acoustics. Brigitte led international soundscape research for three decades, and today, almost all acoustic conferences have at least one session on soundscape.



### *What Is Your Leadership Style?*

Within these broad descriptions of leadership, each leader gets to find their personal approach. Our previous ASA leadership collectively describe their leadership styles as direct, inclusive/collaborative, organized, decisive, and timely. They recommend leading by example and not asking anyone to do something that you yourself would not agree to. A leader should listen more than talk; give credit to others; take responsibility when needed; embrace the power of a sincere apology; be open to new ideas; empower their team; display fairness; and promote good communication. Peggy Nelson (ASA president 2022–2023; director, Center for Applied and Translational Sensory Science [CATSS] and associate dean, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis) encourages us to “figure out your own style and build on your unique leadership qualifications. Not all of us are boisterous or outgoing, but we can build on our strengths.”

### *What Challenges Do Leaders Face?*

Previous ASA presidents and vice presidents were asked about the challenges they faced in leadership roles. Many of the respondents discussed the balancing act of working with groups who hold different views. Insightfully, one former president stated that, at times, some individuals cannot come to a compromise. When making a final decision, “[those individuals] will not love you, and that is all right.” At times, you must consider what is best for the overall organization or team.

Some challenges are directly related to women in leadership roles. One survey responder observed how “as a woman, there is a narrow window of leadership styles that are acceptable compared with those of a man, based on societal norms. You cannot be dictatorial; you cannot be too assertive; you must rely more on social skills.” Sometimes leaders must overcome a perception that they are too inexperienced for a leadership role, a perception that can also be influenced by gender.

Another response noted that balancing the work required in leadership roles with being a parent can be challenging as well, particularly when trying to spend time with your family but still wanting to do a good job in a leadership position.

### *How Do You Handle Difficult Situations?*

Leaders often face challenges. The survey responses provide insights on how to handle difficult situations. First, it is best to not avoid the situation but to deal with it in a timely manner. Second, transparency and direct, straightforward communication are key. Third, a leader must be prepared, or even overprepared, for meetings and keeping the discussion on track. To ensure fairness, all sides of an argument should be heard equally, without letting one party talk more, while the leader refrains from taking sides. Listen without interrupting, show kindness, and even display humor when faced with difficult situations. Try to see both sides of an issue while remaining neutral.

The outcome of such difficult discussions is hopefully that a compromise can be reached in which all sides can see how the decision made will benefit the organization. However, such a favorable outcome is not always achievable. One great piece of advice for when it comes to making a final decision that sides with one party or the other is to not be rushed and give yourself room with the difficult decision. In a timely manner, back up your decision with written explanations. Finally, once you have made an informed and deliberate decision, trust that you have made the right call.

### *How Can Someone Get Started in Leadership?*

When people begin participating in the ASA, they often ask how they can get involved. Josh Gladden (ASA vice president 2021–2022; vice president of research, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) recommends you “Say yes to opportunities and requests: chair a session, be a reviewer, look for opportunities to contribute. It is noticed and you will be tapped for leadership roles.” Maureen Stone (ASA president 2021–2022; Professor Emerita, University of Maryland, Baltimore) suggests to first lead “in a small environment and work to bigger ones. Don’t be afraid of doing something foolish; you’ll get past it. You’ll learn from each opportunity and get better at leading.” As you begin to lead, reach out to colleagues who you feel are good leaders and ask them to be your mentors.

To begin volunteering on one of ASA’s administrative committees, complete the sign-up form. A description

## EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

of the technical and administrative committees can be found at [acousticalsociety.org/volunteer](http://acousticalsociety.org/volunteer).

### How Can You Know If You Should Accept a Leadership Role?

As time progresses and your leadership skills develop, you will likely be asked to take on larger leadership roles. To determine if a new leadership role is a good fit for you, Ronald A. Roy (ASA vice president 2016–2017; professor of mechanical engineering, the University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom) recommends “A good litmus test is to ask yourself how you can best advance the objectives of your institution. Is it through your own contributions or by enabling those of others? If the latter, then you are poised to lead.” Before you decide to accept a large leadership role, Ilene Busch-Vishniac (ASA president 2003–2004; currently, Acoustical and Higher Education Consultant; former president of Saskatchewan University, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada) recommends identifying “at least two people already in such positions and interviewing them carefully to determine the full shape of the position, the parts that have caused personal or professional strain, and those that have caused personal or professional pride.” Once you understand what the role entails and your motivations, you will be able to make an informed decision.

### Always More to Learn

This column has provided some ideas for developing as a leader. We, the authors, have learned a lot from observing their leadership styles and hope you find their feedback helpful. As you embrace leadership roles, Subha Maruvada (ASA vice president 2022–2023; Therapeutic Ultrasound Program Lead, Acoustics Research Engineer, United States Federal Drug Administration) recommends that you “read books by those whose leadership style you admire and take courses on communication, coaching, facilitation and leadership” (see **Suggestions for Further Reading** for some helpful books). We encourage everyone to observe leaders closely. Learn from the good ones how to be effective and from the bad ones how to not be ineffective. As you embrace the leadership roles you are offered, you can develop effective leadership skills and contribute greatly in your personal, community, and professional organizations.

#### Suggestions for Further Reading

Arbinger Institute. (2018). *Leadership and Self-Deception: Getting Out of the Box*. Berrett-Kohlers Publishers, Inc., Oakland, CA.

Blanchard, K., and Johnson, S. (2003). *The One Minute Manager*. William Morrow & Co., New York, NY.  
Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to Lead*. Vermillion, London, UK.  
Covey, S. R. (1989). *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*. Simon and Schuster, New York, NY.  
Stone, D., and Heen, S. (2014). *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*. Portfolio Penguin, London, UK.

#### Contact Information

**Tracianne B. Neilsen** [tbn@byu.edu](mailto:tbn@byu.edu)

*Department of Physics and Astronomy  
Brigham Young University  
Provo, Utah 84602; USA*

**Kathleen E. Wage** [k.e.wage@ieee.org](mailto:k.e.wage@ieee.org)

*Electrical and Computer Engineering Department  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, Virginia 22030, USA*

**Arezoo Talebzadeh** [arezoo.talebzadeh@ugent.be](mailto:arezoo.talebzadeh@ugent.be)

*Department of Information Technology  
Ghent University  
9000 Ghent, Belgium*

**Anna Diedesch** [diedesa@wwu.edu](mailto:diedesa@wwu.edu)

*Communication Sciences and Disorders Department  
Western Washington University  
Bellingham, Washington 98225, USA*

**JASA** EXPRESS  
LETTERS

Rapidly publishing  
gold **open access**  
research in acoustics

[bit.ly/JASA-EL](https://bit.ly/JASA-EL)