

President Setting: For Cynthia Sugimoto, A School like No Other



Cynthia Sugimoto (Lea+Elliott Associate Principal), Photos © John Livzey, 2017

Lea+Elliott Associate Principal Cindy Sugimoto honed her leadership skills when she served as WTS-LA president in 2009 and 2010. She feels there are certain things that can be learned by being a chapter president that will be helpful to any career.

For example, "What does it take to have an effective meeting? It may sound mundane, but it's actually very important. Often no one teaches you these details." After learning the formal rules through *Robert's Rules of Order*, which she didn't know when she became president, she concluded it all comes down to a balance between preparation and freedom. "Since the LA chapter has a very large board, a lot more advanced work was necessary than I had initially thought. Development of a detailed agenda and schedule are key to a successful and timely meeting. Additionally, I would meet in advance with specific committee chair, for example, to flesh out the details of an idea or initiative and to develop a clear motion that could be presented at the actual board meeting. It was also helpful to talk to key board members and develop support for a new initiative before a board meeting, instead of winging it during the meeting.

Getting this input permitted the idea to be vetted, concerns to be raised, and allowed time for necessary modifications to be made prior to the meeting. I learned to be a little more politically sensitive and aware than I was initially.

"Also, I learned to take a little more time to consider what I wanted to say beforehand to minimize off-the-cuff remarks and discussion. But there's also a benefit to allowing open dialog during a meeting. It's very important to have a good balance of both. If you do too much in advance and there's no discussion, some people can feel left out of the process. If you don't do any preparation, things can get out of hand, the meeting runs too long, and it's hard to accomplish anything. But I don't want to give the impression that I've got this down. I'm still learning!"



Today Ms. Sugimoto combines the leadership skills she learned as WTS-LA president with her experience as a retired captain in the U.S. Navy to inform her role with Lea+Elliott, a transportation firm

offering broad consulting services primarily on automated transit systems. She credits her experience as WTS-LA president as providing a unique understanding of leadership.



“Running a volunteer organization is in many ways more difficult than leading a similar-sized unit in a firm. In fact, it requires better leadership skills to be successful. In a WTS chapter, no one has to be there for a paycheck, so proper motivation, encouragement, and appreciation are all essential. Of course, you should do all of that in your regular job, but people often can get by without doing that because people must do their jobs. So WTS is a great training ground to exercise and develop those skills, and to learn from your mistakes in a safe supportive environment. You don’t necessarily get those experiences when

you’re a junior engineer. But if you’ve been a leader in WTS, you are ready when you are moved into a project management or supervisory position.”

In 2008, Ms. Sugimoto attended WTS International's eighth annual Leadership Program. A rare opportunity, the 3-day course focused on improving leadership and communication skills. She especially enjoyed meeting and learning from top national transportation policy makers and other instructors. The camaraderie that developed with her classmates topped off the experience. "It is excellent training, and I strongly recommend the program to all WTS members." WTS recently revamped its Leadership Program. Now there is a Mid-career Leadership Program and an Executive Leadership Program, which allow more participants each year.

Though modest, Ms. Sugimoto accomplished much during her tenure. Hosting numerous signature programs—including a celebrated, almost impromptu event featuring then-USDOT Undersecretary Polly Trottenberg, who brought with her the FHWA and FTA Administrators—Sugimoto also oversaw a scholarship and awards dinner that celebrated a quarter century of the chapter. In recognition of her years of hard work and many achievements, she was honored as the chapter's 2011 Member of the Year. But for her, the signature moments have much more to do with giving back.

“We developed an online event-registration system that more than 20 chapters adopted. It really helped our chapter reduce the amount of manual labor for our volunteers. When someone registered for an event, the system automatically sent out a RSVP acknowledgement email and entered the registration into a spreadsheet. That was all done manually before. I’m particularly proud of a professional-development certificate scholarship that we developed. Most of our scholarships go to undergraduate and graduate students, but I wanted something for our mid-career members working in the industry. This new scholarship served a real need in our chapter. But what brought me the most satisfaction was bringing people into WTS and mentoring them. I have always had a passion for that. And after all, that’s really what WTS-LA is all about.”